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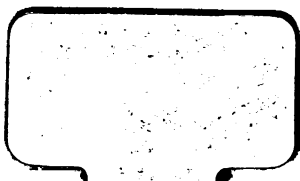
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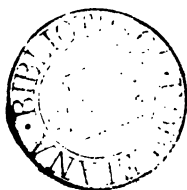
THE
BEAUTIFUL MISS BARRINGTON.

By HOLME LEE,

AUTHOR OF "SYLVAN HOLT'S DAUGHTER," "FOR RICHER, FOR POORER,"
"BASIL GODFREY'S CAPRICE," ETC. ETC.

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THE BEAUTIFUL MISS BARRINGTON.

PROLOGUE.

SOME histories carry their moral writ so large upon the face of them that all who run may read it. Felicia's is one of these; and yet it is not a common history.

Her portrait as a child appeared in a recent exhibition of modern pictures, and was extolled by connoisseurs as the finest example of a famous painter, lately dead. There was always a crowd before it, for it was, indeed, a glorious work of art, and had a charm for the most careless as for the most critical observer. In the catalogue it was described simply as "Miss

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Felicia." A last look at the innocent little beauty was a constant wind-up to their day's pleasure with art-lovers who went and went again to the gallery. Amongst them there were doubtless some who sought to know more of this exquisite child when she grew into a woman, and picked up shreds and patches of gossip, stale and untrue, and wondered and pitied at the divine promise blighted in that sweet loveliness. And a few there must have been who stood at gaze with a personal recollection of Felicia. *Infelicia* perhaps they called her; not discerning her life as a whole: severing her temptation from her deliverance, her peril from her final rescue.

The world is full of guilty tragedies; its ears are greedy for the cruel triumphs of the wicked. Will it have patience for a day with the parable of a woman who withstood the world, the flesh and the devil, and overcame them? For that is the history of Felicia.

CHAPTER I.

FELICIA'S PORTRAIT.

To begin at the beginning.

Felicia was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Barrington of Stoneleigh, in Gladeshire. Her father was a man of pleasure from his youth, gay, handsome, lively, agreeable, witty. Her mother was Lucilla Bethell, an only child and an heiress. Yet she was married for love, was a loveable excellent woman, full of salutary influences for all around her. Environed by these salutary influences, by every refinement, luxury and comfort that can add grace and dignity to life, their daughter was born (the earnest of sons hereafter) and christened by that name of good omen "Felicia." Sons

followed, but not one survived beyond infancy, and at twelve years of age Felicia was the sole child left to her parents, while her mother was become a confirmed invalid, without hope of more to replace those she had lost.

It was at this period that the portrait which has been mentioned was painted. The painter was an enthusiast in his art, and his subject was one to kindle enthusiasm. When he had put the last touches to it, he laid down his palette and pencil exulting, and said with a long-drawn breath: "I shall never better *that!*"

He had set up his easel in the north parlour, the summer parlour, and thither we had all gone to admire his finished work. It was one of those glowing August evenings when the air is suffused with warm soft light, and the effect of this light on the picture was as the mellow effect of time. Felicia, finally released from the constraint of sitting for her portrait, and most glad of her release, was jumping up and down on her little white satin feet, her white frock and blue sash shaken out, and all her rippled, unbound, golden

hair flying far and wide from pearly neck and brow.

“Madcap ! pretty witch !” cried her father, and glanced from the lovely copy to the lovelier original with fond, proud satisfaction. Her mother prayed in a tremulous whisper : “ God be good to her ! God bless and keep her ! ”

Felicia danced up to the front, curtsied to herself, kissed her hand, and was as wantonly gay as a bird pruning its feathers in the sunshine. Then she danced off, and out of the room, and returned leading by the collar a tall deer-hound to which she was talking with mock solemnity. “ Now, Sir Bevis, you are going to behold your sovereign lady and mistress, and to pay her respectful homage,” said she, and as the rest fell back, humouring her pretty sport, she held him opposite the picture. What Sir Bevis saw to discontent him, who shall say ? but he made a long melancholy whine at the bright image, and then turned his head, and licked Felicia’s face. “ Oh, naughty, naughty ! ” cried she, and rubbed her cheek, and the dog

pulling to get free, she let him go with a bound out of the window, and would have gone after him had not her father bidden her stay, and amuse him.

“In every face there is a history or a prophecy.” What then was the prophecy of Felicia’s? Love, joy, honour, happiness? You would have thought so to see her in everyday temper. And yet the enduring spell of the portrait was not so much in its airy, sunny beauty as in its suggested pathos.

The artist was aware of this. By the subtle instinct of sympathy he had apprehended what spirit wrought in the child’s tender brain; a spirit that had already begun to inquire: Why do the flowers fade? why does the grass wither? why do all things that live suffer? and to fall into reveries over the groaning and travailing of the whole creation in pain, and into quaint philosophic doubts concerning the just government of the world. If Felicia had ruled it the roses would have blushed without too vivid heat, the

fruit would have swelled and ripened without rain, the being of the creatures would have been a restful balmy content, and her own heart would have been drawn to heaven in love, untried, unbroken.

She had the temperament of genius, that singular and beautiful child. I have many pictures of her in my mind's eye besides that which the artist painted. She was given to "fancying," as her nurse phrased it, to "fancying" in the prettiest, most graceful pantomimic way. She would flit hither and thither waving her arms, her head, her whole lithe supple body in harmony with some ærial music that none but herself could hear. She characterized the flowers and invested them with an emotional life. She never plucked them for mere idleness. "Let them live, they are happy in the sun," she would say; or gathering them, she would gather them feelingly, and tell them they were going to live again in her mamma's presence, and they must be glad and gladden her. "For we should none of us live to ourselves only," she would explain, as if so they

might be consoled. Then she acted impromptu comedies with Sir Bevis ; they were abroad hunting the stag, or they were pursuing a recreant knight carrying off an unwilling lady, or they were keeping ward at the Manor gates against an enemy. If she rode out on her pony Stella, here again was opportunity for "fancying." She was riding a race or a challenge, she was fleeing from a flood, a prairie fire, from wolves on a Siberian waste. With servants, with the labouring folk and with the poor she was cordially kind. There were none about Stoneleigh but loved her. She would often have liked to change places, and to bear the burden that she saw others bearing. The hardships of a hard lot touched her long before she understood the compensations with which an all-wise Providence balances the seeming unequal fates of men ; and her voice, sweet always, was ever the sweetest when she spoke with those for whom she felt pitiful. She was indeed a dear, good, most affectionate child, but one trembled for her ; these sensitive souls have such a capacity for

suffering—are apt to make themselves so many miseries.

The portrait was hung in Mrs. Barrington's room, in "mamma's room," as Felicia styled the elegant boudoir adjoining her bed-chamber, where the poor lady's days were henceforward for the most part spent. She could see it as she lay upon her couch, and it made company for her when she could bear none other. I was one of the very few visitors admitted to her privacy after this time, and Felicia grew up in my sight as it were, and in the very core of my heart. Her mother bespoke my kindness for her, my tender watchfulness when her own should be withdrawn, and Felicia learnt to love me from her quite early years.

And now let me offer my credentials as her apologist.

I was a remote cousin of Mr. Barrington's, a poor cousin, who came first to his notice as the young wife of the rector's young curate. The living of Stoneleigh was in the gift of Mrs. Barrington, and after three years of cottage lodgings, on the rector's promotion to a deanery and a fatter

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benefice, we were promoted to the vacant rectory—
for merit more than for kinship, as our dear
patroness was pleased to assure us, and as we were
best pleased to believe. And our home there we
have never exchanged for any other since.

CHAPTER II.

FELICIA'S HOME.

THE church, the manor-house, the village and the parsonage of Stoneleigh were all within hail of each other. That was the fashion of building in the days when it was considered the first duty of the gentry to live on their lands, that the people might be constantly employed, and the poor succoured. Only a road leading to the stables and offices of the manor divided the churchyard from the manor gardens, which were beautiful and extensive. Park there was none. Behind the house rose a steep wooded hill, kept neat with shaded walks for sultry weather, and brilliant with the richest profusion of wild flowers in spring that ever I saw anywhere : it was so old,

had been the care of so many generations. The out - look from the rustic seats, set at vantage-points, was over scenery the most English, peaceful, green, cheerful, delightful; over broad pasture-fields, groups of forest trees, a winding wide river, an ancient market-town, dominated by a ruined castle three miles distant across the valley, and over low rounded hills beyond, where the sheep fed by thousands in the summer, and in the winter the snow lay deep and late.

The manor-house itself was one of those picturesque piles of building, irregular and of various dates, that testify to the long peace of English society. The oldest part was at the back, where a stone tablet over the window of the servants' hall bore the date of 1576. The principal rooms were on the south front, and a broad corridor running through the house from east to west, and dividing them from the domestic offices, formed a noble gallery for the Stoneleigh portraits. The house was not too large for comfort, and never having been neglected or given up as a residence since it was founded, it was in perfect

order throughout. The library was a charming retreat, rich in fine editions, choice bindings and a thousand signs and memorials of the hereditary taste and learning of the Bethells. Adjoining was the long drawing-room, with two Tudor bay windows bountiful of light, and in a line with it, the music-room. The great dining-parlour westward belonged to the original building, and was a sumptuously carved and decorated chamber. A small ante-room beyond led into what was now the billiard-room, formerly the ball-room, into the north-parlour, and into the flower-garden. Every part was justly proportioned, every room adapted by its cosiness, its cheerfulness or its splendour to its appropriate purpose. There was no other house in the county to compare with Stoneleigh for the characteristics which accumulate about a house that has been for centuries the home of one family, the stage of all its history. Felicia loved it for its own delightsomeness ; for its traditions of patriotism, self-devotion and honour in the men, and of loveliness, piety and purity in the women of her mother's race ; she

was proud of it, she gloried in it as the noblest part of her inheritance. For already she knew herself as the heiress of Stoneleigh, and was done reverence to as the maiden who must some day be mistress of all.

Every circumstance that surrounds us in youth goes more or less to the making and maturing of character. Felicia was endowed with an ardent joy in beauty, and it was her happy fortune to live in the midst of things beautiful to the eye, and pleasant to the senses; to hear the winds forbidden to blow on her too roughly; to see the stones and thorns taken out of her path; to be nourished and cherished as the centre of many great and tender hopes. Her *happy* fortune, I have written, and let it stand; a girlhood flattered by indulgence, I take to be a really happy fortune: a treasure of sunny memories to look back upon in the winter of discontent, and in the tedious depression of dull days when the clouds return after the rain. I never saw in Felicia any selfishness, any want of considerateness towards those

devoted to her service. Petting could not spoil her generous temper. She could be angry in a just cause, for her impulses were true, but she was ever prompt to be reconciled, and it was easy to foresee that for love's sake much would be forgiven her.

Mrs. Barrington was her daughter's only teacher while she lived. She was herself an admirably accomplished woman, a fine musician, a sweet singer, a correspondent whose letters her friends were covetous of; skilled with her pencil, her needle, a various and intelligent reader, a very saint in bearing her trials and sufferings. Felicia contemplated her as a pattern of holiness, as the wisest and loveliest lady in the land. All her ambition was to be like her, and a better ambition could not have possessed an ingenuous mind. It made the ways of learning easy to her and very attractive. A seat by her mother's side in that secluded boudoir, a book on her lap, no formal rule, no discipline but the gentle constraint of affection—thus she was trained, and thus she acquired more knowledge of such things as it is

pretty and good for a young lady to know than any of her cousins or companions about Stoneleigh. To my mind, there was never one amongst them all who could compare with her !

So much for the sunshine of Felicia's early life. I must speak of its shadows now. For shadows there were, many and deep, brooding within and without her beautiful home, though none had as yet fallen upon her path. In the fulness of time they would stretch to her feet, rise as high as her heart, then cover her head with a veil impenetrable. She had her enviers and unfriends even amongst her kindred, but it was not they who could hurt her. All her sorrows came by those she loved : the cruellest by her father whom she loved best in the world—if love may be measured by sacrifice.

It is hard to put aside prejudice and partiality where we are profoundly interested, but I will endeavour to relate Mr. Barrington's part in his daughter's history with as little fear or favour as I show to others, my own blood though he was. The whole was transacted within the limits of my

personal observation, and perhaps there was no other witness, without private ends to serve, who knew the circumstances as intimately. Since Felicia's death her papers have also come into my possession, and by their light many incidents that were purposely obscured at the time of their occurrence are made clear. From these papers I may possibly have need to make copious extracts by and by, but for the present I shall proceed by way of narrative.

Mr. Barrington was the younger son of Colonel Barrington of Stitchley, and had held a commission in the Guards until his marriage with Lucilla Bethell raised him above the necessity of a profession. His patrimony, originally insignificant, had been further diminished by his youthful waste, and the great show he made as a chief magnate of Gladeshire was entirely supported on the great fortunes that he had won with his wife. She had brought him Stoneleigh, that fine estate, with a notable residence upon it, and in a popular home-county. His ideas enlarged with his good luck, and he would have pulled the manor-house

down to rebuild it on a much statelier plan had not his wife pleaded urgently for its preservation. It was the most ancient dwelling-place of her family; she had been born there, had grown up there, and with a steadfast clinging to what was dear and familiar, she never ceased from her gentle entreaties until she had prevailed with her husband to let it remain as it was. He condescended at length to oblige her to whom he owed so many obligations, and when the novelty of wealth had worn off, he also began to confess a preference for the mellowed beauties of Stoneleigh, and ended by identifying himself with it as tenaciously as if it were his birth-right.

And the Gladeshire estate, large as it was, was yet but a small part of what Mr. Barrington enjoyed through his wife. The accumulations of a long minority had been paid over to him in hard cash; in the rich fen districts of Lincolnshire, and in the Yorkshire wolds, were fat farms, in Wales were productive mines, and in the county-town were streets of warehouses and shops, built upon land held by lease from the Bethells.

And all had devolved on Lucilla as the only child of the late owner :—too much, far too much, she had been heard to say, with a devout wish appended that her poor Uncle Tom had been endowed with a liberal portion out of her superfluity. But she could divest herself of nothing in his favour; and the jealous ill-will that he was pleased to entertain against Mr. Barrington, as the husband of his heiress-niece, operated naturally against her desire to help him in his frequent straits.

I never liked Mr. Tom Bethell; indeed, I think there were but very few people who did like him. He was the most wearisome, fatiguing idle man in society that it was possible to meet. Bred to no profession, he spent his life in desultory waiting about for something to happen that should give him something to do. In a bachelor this might have been tolerated, but in the father of a dozen children it was contemptible. And all the world knew what he waited for :—he has it now, and therefore one is the less inclined to spare him.

Tom Bethell was still at Eton when his elder brother died, leaving Lucilla, a child of six, as his sole heiress. Her person was committed to the custody of her mother, under certain restrictions; as to her fortune she was made a ward of chancery. Tom had no voice allowed in the government of either the one or the other. This was not singular while he was a school-boy; but when he grew to man's estate and found himself excluded from all power and authority over the vast property his succession to which was only barred by the life of one fragile girl, he felt himself deeply slighted and ill-used. Nor did he hide his sense of injury, laying the blame of it upon his sister-in-law, whose influence over his brother had been notorious. The dowager did not let any love be lost between them, and frankly discouraged his visits to Stoneleigh. She professed to be afraid of his envious disposition.

Just before he was of age Tom had married a lady of family and fortune, but fifteen years his senior. He lost her at the birth of a second daughter, and within twelve months he married

again. This time his choice fell upon a girl, of parentage no more than respectable, and without a sixpence, but very lovely. Some people counted his marriages amongst his follies. I did not. He married for love on both occasions, and I never heard that he repented. His second wife was of the same age as his niece Lucilla, who married Mr. Barrington later in the same year, being then just eighteen. The ladies would fain have been friends, but Tom Bethell was so free in his expressions against Mr. Barrington in all companies that it was impossible to keep up a good understanding for long together. And when the Barrington boys dropped off one after the other like untimely fruit, Tom Bethell triumphed visibly; for his own progeny increased and multiplied so fast that he had soon his quiver full, and had no need to be ashamed when he talked with his enemy in the gate.

"If anything should happen to Cousin Felicia, after her mamma, Stoneleigh would be *ours*, you know;" his eldest girl Rosy said to me one day. She spoke as if the idea of "something happening

to Cousin Felicia," with all its agreeable contingencies, had been made quite familiar to her expectation. I was angry, and indulged myself in a sarcastic rejoinder. "What but *death* can happen to 'Cousin Felicia' that would promote your wishes? While she lives she is as effectual a hindrance to them as a houseful of sons." And from that day forward I shared the distrust of Mr. Tom Bethell which animated the dowager, Felicia's grandmamma.

The terms of the marriage-settlements of Mr. and Mrs. Barrington were never fully known to me, nor perhaps to anybody out of the family except the lawyers; but certain clauses of them became public later on as matter of dispute with Tom Bethell. There can be no denial that they were very generous as regarded Mr. Barrington. Lucilla had given her gay lover all her heart, and Mrs. Bethell was also most indulgently prepossessed in his favour. It is possible that the writings, as Tom averred, were drawn up under his instructions, but it is highly improbable that they traversed any ulterior rights, or were more than

liberally just, the fact considered that the young lady was a ward of chancery. The landed estates were entailed and could not be alienated, but the use or abuse of them was almost unlimited in possession, and Mr. Barrington soon proved himself a master under whom property was not likely to improve, or even to be kept clear of encumbrance. He was, indeed, a lavish spender, and as years went on, his wife had other and grievous troubles besides her loss of children and loss of health. Tom Bethell made these the ground of his animosity against Mr. Barrington; and to give Tom his due, he had but too much right of complaint.

Mrs. Bethell, the grandmamma, a very sprightly, youthful grandmamma, resided at the Dower House, about two miles from Stoneleigh. Her jointure was handsome, and her establishment suitable to her position. She had a humble companion with her, a Miss Reed, one of those meek, supple, obliging characters who nearly always succeed in life to the full measure of their ambition—this ambition rising no higher than to

be well-spoken of by their patrons, well-lodged, well-fed, and indolently amused and comfortable. Her service with Mrs. Bethell was not onerous, but Mrs. Bethell treated her as perfectly invaluable. The lively grandmamma was a prodigious talker, had an irrepressible itch for gossip, for recounting old stories, for discussing her neighbours' business; and Miss Reed was beyond praise as a listener. She was a proser, too, give her the opportunity, and had that trick of general and cautious depreciation which is so welcome to idle folks in an idle hour. I did not love Miss Reed; I know that her soft, busy, qualifying tongue, did much mischief that it never got the discredit of.

Mr. Tom Bethell also had a house not far from Stoneleigh—Ringwood. It had been ever the way with the Bethells to hang together, that they might be a power in their county. But, for the present, Tom did not live there: according to his own showing, could not afford to live there; though others thought he might have done it very well, better than anywhere else, could he

liberally just, the fact considered that the young lady was a ward of chancery. The landed estates were entailed and could not be alienated, but the use or abuse of them was almost unlimited in possession, and Mr. Barrington soon proved himself a master under whom property was not likely to improve, or even to be kept clear of encumbrance. He was, indeed, a lavish spender, and as years went on, his wife had other and grievous troubles besides her loss of children and loss of health. Tom Bethell made these the ground of his animosity against Mr. Barrington; and to give Tom his due, he had but too much right of complaint.

Mrs. Bethell, the grandmamma, a very sprightly, youthful grandmamma, resided at the Dover House, about two miles from Stoneleigh. Her jointure was handsome, and her establishment suitable to her position. She had a humble companion with her, a Miss Reed, one of those meek, supple, obliging characters who nearly always succeed in life to the full measure of their ambition—this ambition rising no higher than to

Bethell make himself ever so disagreeable, Mrs. Barrington was resolutely friendly with his wife, into whose private hand many a bank-bill found its way, and many a gift of handsome raiment for herself and her troop of little ones. At the great anniversaries, too, at Christmas, and on every birthday, it was Felicia's duty and delight to send presents to each of her cousins. She began early to understand the happiness of having much in her power, and her mother inculcated the exercise of a wise liberality: the art of giving judiciously, the art of being helpful without encumbering those she helped with patronage, or an irksome sense of obligation. Already, as a child, she was resorted to by the agents and purveyors of local charity.

Mr. Barrington was pleased that his daughter should acquire a general popularity, but he meddled scarcely at all in her education. He had his own concerns, and was much away from Stoneleigh during his wife's later years. They had been accustomed to go to London for the season, and to make their foreign tours together, but from

the time her strength began to fail, she remained constantly at home, and he arranged for himself an independent career of pleasure abroad. He pleaded his constitutional gaiety against the monotony of a country life, and his wife let him leave her, at first, without too anxious a reluctance. But soon rumours of his prodigality became rife in our neighbourhood. One day we heard by chance that the London house was let, and that Mr. Barrington had resumed his bachelor-style of living in club-chambers. Then there was a noise of a great felling of timber in the Yorkshire property, and a loud expostulation from Tom Bethell because young trees were not planted to grow up for the coming generation. "Conscienceless, greedy, wasteful," were the mildest words he had at Mr. Barrington's service.

No one knew where the money went. Stoneleigh was kept up without stint, but its own revenues were more than enough for that; and yet the surplus, with the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire rents, the royalties of the mines, and the town-leases besides, did not suffice for Mr. Barring-

ton's wants, if all was true that was credibly reported. He was said to live with very free society in London, and to be achieving notoriety on the turf. We knew that he never missed his run over to Homburg in the season; and thus, no doubt, much of the old wealth went by a thousand drains into the dead sea of wanton waste, and he had nothing to show for it when it was gone but a bundle of liabilities which he could not redeem, and a few premature lines of care and impatience on his always handsome face.

The way is now, I think, sufficiently cleared by the introduction of the chief members of Felicia's family and this account of their relative positions when she was verging towards womanhood, for me to narrate the events and circumstances of her life henceforward in their natural sequence and order.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT BETHELL OAKS.

SOME date to start from is essential to my story : if further retrospects become necessary in its progress, I will take them henceforth as they occur. The date then that I propose is rather more than two years after the painting of Felicia's portrait, when she was between fourteen and fifteen years of age ; the occasion Mr. Barrington's return from abroad after an absence of two months.

His arrival was quite unexpected. It was brilliant October weather, and as my custom was of an afternoon, I had gone to the Manor to bear Mrs. Barrington company while Felicia took her daily ride on Stella. We were alone together in the boudoir, talking about the dear child, as I

remember, when the echoes of a lively commotion in the hall reached us.

"Can anything have befallen my Felicy?" cried the lady in instant alarm.

"Nothing amiss can have befallen her; for that is her joyous voice," said I, and stepped out on the gallery to see what was the cause of the clamour.

In a moment I discovered that Mr. Barrington was there; for Felicy was in loud glee and rejoicing over him; she had met him on the road, and had turned back to escort him home. Before I could warn Mrs. Barrington, he was running up the stairs, and Felicy was following at his heels. They had always the tenderest welcome for him. His wife's heart might ache, and often did, but her love suffered no decay; and as for Felicia, she quite adored her papa—had no more doubt of his absolute perfection than she had of his pride and delight in her delicious little self. It is the lot of some men—not always the best of men—to be thus environed by innocent faith and worship.

When he had kissed his wife, Mr. Barrington greeted me : " No need to inquire after your well-being, Cousin Clare, you are always blooming. But how is the rector—how is Gower ? " asked he, and shook hands most cordially. He was looking his best for health and handsomeness, and seemed to be in high good-humour. Glad for all sakes that it was so, I came away, leaving the light of content in full glow on Felicia's face, and a soft reflection of her radiance on the poor lady's.

And yet I could not rid myself of a tormenting fear that this sudden, unannounced return home of Mr. Barrington was ominous of evil.

It was on a Saturday morning, a fortnight later, as nearly as I can recollect, that lame Simeon, our gardener, arrested my flower-gathering excursion about the lawn where he was sweeping up the dead leaves of the week to make all tidy for Sunday. With a dolorous shake of his grey old pow, he said : " Here be news, missis ; the gret oaks be a-coming down ; " and as he spoke, he

cast his eyes upwards to the hill behind the manor and the church, along the side of which extended a double avenue of the most magnificent trees in the country : oak-trees that formed half the beauty of Stoneleigh, and were known and spoken of all round the neighbourhood as the Great Bethell Oaks.

Gladeshire is famous for its fine timber, especially for its oaks and beeches ; and of all places in the county Stoneleigh had hitherto maintained its sylvan honours securest. It had never yet been called on to sacrifice them for the redemption of a spendthrift squire or a prodigal son. I also looked up, as Simeon did, to admire the gorgeous autumnal foliage which, seen from a distance, was a crown of glory to the whole village. That it should fall beneath the axe seemed the very recklessness and wastefulness of mischief ; for what was the dead wood worth in comparison of the living beauty ?

He was a complete parish register, our old man, and when I asked who had given him his information, he halted on his broom, and delivered him-

self of his story with the spirit and unction that had earned him his repute as annalist of Stoneleigh.

"Benson telled me himself, no longer ago than last night." (Benson was wood-steward at the Manor.) "'Simeon,' sez he, 'we be agoing to lose some o' wer auldest frens. What think ye o' the Gret Bethell Oaks a-coming down?' 'I dunnot believe it,' sez I. 'Believe it, or let alone believing, so 'it is to be: *so-it-is-to-be*,' sez he, twice over, an' very slow, as if the words were bad to get out."

"The village will not look like itself if they clear the hill," mused I aloud.

"Worse luck to Barrington, who's on'y a cuckoo i' Bethell's nest!" muttered Simeon.

"Let us hope that it is all a mistake of Benson's—like the church-yard yew-trees last year."

"It is no mistake o' Benson's: no more wern't the *yews*; if all be known, it wer my lady that interfered to save 'em. Benson gets powerful stiff in his joints: it is the rheumatism done it—but his mem'ry bean't affected—O dear, no! 'I

should ha' wished 'em to ha' stood my time,' sez he, 'but the decree's gone forth:' he's a better scholar nor some, Benson is, an' 'the decree's gone forth,' sez he. Mayhap my lady will interfere again; but if she saves 'em now, it won't be for verra long—not for verra long—we know who's master. An' Miss Felicia, she's on'y a little lass."

I understood well enough what Simeon meant to imply, but I could not bear to think of it. I turned the subject by asking him what was the supposed age of the Great Bethell Oaks.

"They be a good two hundred year old," said he. "I ha' heerd my father tell the tale o' their planting, an' he had heerd it from his father. It was Squire Marmaduke planted 'em in 1649—after the King's head was cut off—King Charles, his head. Squire Marmaduke was one o' the last an' loyalist o' them that stood for the King, an' after they cut off his head, he came home to Stoneleigh quite heart-broke. He never carried a gun or rode to hounds any more as long as he lived; an' he was that hard dealt wi' while Oliver

was King that he was forced to fell every big tree on the estate to pay his fines and compositions. An' then it was he planted the Langhill wi' the Gret Oaks that now is, an' the Beecham copses beyant the river. He died afore the young King came by his own again, on the verra day Oliver died, an' in a tarrible storm, as they tell. Then it wer that the original King Harry's Oak was blowed down—a verra auld tree that stood where the oak we call King Harry's to this day is standing. Squire Reginald, he planted that. For the Bethells never let a tree fall, whether by wind or axe, but they planted another in its room. This man, he plants nought. He an't o' the good auld stock, Barrington an't, an' the pride on it bean't in him."

"Has there ever been one of the Great Bethell Oaks blown down or cut down within your recollection?"

"Never a one has been cut down within anybody's recollection that I know of; but there was two blowed down on the shoulder o' the hill when I was courting my Mary. It was on the Langhill

that the lads and lasses who were keeping company walked of a Sunday in the summer-time then——”

“They walk there still, Simeon.”

“Aye, aye, they walk there still. I reckon there’s not much change i’ the fashion o’ courting. It was not just summer, for it wer this season o’ the year, an’ a mort o’ leaves o’ the grund. Mary an’ me went up after church, for all it was wildish. ‘It will be for the last time till spring comes again, Simeon,’ sez she. ‘An’ when spring comes again we shall be married, Mary,’ sez I. An’ so we was. I lost her thirty-seven years ago come Christmas. But I wer a-telling you o’ the two gret oaks that was blowed down. It was that same Sunday night, an’ we had been sitting under ‘em i’ the afternoon. The wind was rising then, and by dark it was awful—as awful, I should say, as that auld September night when Oliver an’ Squire Marmaduke gave up the ghost. It was a’most the last act and deed o’ Squire Wilfred to set two young trees where they’d fallen. I can’t mind that ever I see him again out-o’-doors—but he had a few on us in to bid us good-by afore he

died. He wer a real gentleman, like the auld gentleman, his father, wer Squire Wilfred. Mr. Tom's another sort. He might carry all his frens on his back from here to Gladestone, an' not tire wi' his load."

Simeon with a vengeful sweep of his broom added force to his epigrammatic allusion; and having said his say, and got a bitter cud to chew, he bent his poor old limbs to his task again. I returned into the house, and sought Arthur to report to him what I had heard. He was in his study, just applying himself to the revision of a sermon for the morrow; but he laid down his pen, and came out with me when I desired it. He was as incredulous at the moment as I had been, but he realized the likelihood of the menace sooner, and was grieved enough. He knew more of Mr. Barrington's pressing necessities than I did.

We went up the Langhill together from our garden, and spent a beautiful hour in and out under the still thick shadow of the great oaks. Under foot the turf was green and soft as emerald

velvet, flecked with drops of gold. A semi-transparent haze, suffused with sunshine, was on the river, the valley, the park-like pastures; the smoke of the village ascended amidst its mossy orchards; nearer below us were the time-and-weather tinted red roofs of the Manor, its grotesque chimney-stacks of stone, the grey old church and churchyard, and our own modest little parsonage, from the secure quiet shelter of which we have seen so many changes since that still October morning. Seek the world round, and I do not believe you could discover a spot more altogether homelike, peaceful, delightful than this Gladeshire village of Stoneleigh!

From the top of the hill we had a cheerful view of the high-road winding for a mile or more between hedge-rows of timber. Many a time have I watched from the height for the coming home of my husband after his brief absences, and of my son since he is grown. The great oaks were a look-out screen for the manor, and indeed for the whole village. Often have I seen Felicia there in the days that are gone.

Arthur recognized our visitor the first. We had both espied a gentleman riding hard on the road in the distance, but the bowery foliage of the manor hid him again until he drew rein at our gate.

"It is Mr. Tom Bethell," said my husband.
"We must go down and receive him."

I for my part went with reluctance. It was easy to guess what Mr. Tom Bethell had come about; he always came to us to pour forth his grievances against the manor, to search into its mysteries, and to rail at its misdoings. The peril of the Great Oaks had no doubt reached his long ears. It was a wonder to me how quickly he heard of what was being done, said, and even thought at the manor. Let him be ever so far off, each rumour as it arose flew direct to him, and if it ever so remotely threatened his reversionary interests, home it brought him to his rats' castle at Ringwood, and then to us for inquiry, verification or disproof. But he was rarely misinformed. I imagine that he had some telegraphic wire amongst the upper servants

at the manor, though I never knew, or, indeed, sought to know, his medium of intelligence.

As we passed through the wicket upon the lawn Simeon was giving a side-long surly heed to the new-comer's civilities of greeting. So long ago as when Tom was a boy he had got Simeon his discharge from the manor-service because his lame leg, broken and ill-mended, impeded his movements in the stubble when partridges were on the wing. Simeon had been but a day-labourer since, and had suffered so much of hardship that the rancour of his injury had never healed. It was Tom Bethell's policy now to try and stand well with the Stoneligh folk, but Simeon refused to forget his ancient wrong, and his shrewd wrinkled eyes peered angrily at his adversary still as he lent him an unwilling attention. They had got on the subject of the Great Oaks, of which Tom was speaking in a tone of regret, assuming that the destruction of them would be a public calamity to the village and not merely a private loss to the manor. But Simeon guessed that Tom was thinking of

his own share in the trees (a sentimental share it might seem, but in his secret hopes it was a very material one) and a smile full of maliciousness twisted his dry old mouth as he twice reiterated their sentence of condemnation. Tom turned to us with a lively loud expansiveness of manner, but his next countenance was the truer index to his state of mind. Like all the Bethells he was handsome in the face, but his figure was insignificant and his gait ungainly, slouching and restless: as his character was, and as his idle life had confirmed him.

We all went together into my drawing-room—such a tiny room—and as our visitor dropt heavily upon the sofa he cried out against the heat and closeness of it. There was no fire, and one casement was open, but the sun shone in very brightly. Arthur opened the other, and then poor Tom cried out against the draught, and begged that it might be re-closed. All his surface geniality had vanished, and he was quite himself, complaining and denunciatory as usual.

“You know what has brought me over,” he

began, plunging at once into his trouble. "Barrington must be mad, or worse than mad, to dream of felling the Great Oaks!"

"You have your information earlier than ourselves. It is only this morning since breakfast that we have heard there was any such purpose afoot," said Arthur.

"And you believe that it is a serious intention?"

"Simeon was Clare's informant. Not a whisper of it has reached us from any other quarter."

"Simeon quoted Benson as his authority," said I.

"It is true enough, and poor Benson is very low about it. Barrington is capable of sacrificing every tree on the property to gratify his insane vanity. But the Great Bethell Oaks shall *not* come down! I'll go myself to Lucilla. She *must* hinder the desecration. She has the power, and I shall insist upon her exercising it—for Felicia's sake—."

The mention of Felicia was an after-thought, and followed awkwardly on what had gone before.

Arthur did not speak. We never presumed to offer Tom Bethell advice, and, indeed, it was not for that he sought us. It was only that he might talk out of the fulness of his heart to two persons who thoroughly understood his affairs, present and prospective. I am not sure that he knew of my cousinship to Mr. Barrington; if he did, he was pleased to talk as though he had forgotten it; and it was not worth while to refresh his memory.

“My poor brother Wilfred never could have anticipated the ruin that is overtaking the property under the monstrous regimen of women!” resumed our visitor after a pause. “The dowager is the silliest woman alive, and Lucilla is almost as weak. It is a vast misfortune for a girl to be very rich. She invariably falls a prey to some good-looking, needy-scamp of a fortune-hunter. If Felicia live to grow up, mark my words, her fate will be as bad or worse than her mother’s.”

Now Mrs. Barrington had not been what is called an unhappy or ill-used wife. She had dearly loved her husband, and she loved him to

the last. There were in him many amiable qualities, great tenderness of voice and manner, and a courtesy to her that never declined. A harsh word, an unkind look, were quite strange to her experience; and gentleness at home covers many a selfish act beyond its charmed circle, as we all know. Mr. Barrington's habits were too profuse for a man who had all his wealth by his wife, and out of this profuseness arose every grief and vexation that she had to endure through his fault. There are worse ways than this of striking hard upon a woman's heart, and I was prompted to say as much. Tom Bethell did not dare deny it—he could not deny it. But he answered me with a sneer.

“Lucilla adores her slavery—no one ever doubted that. Barrington can do what he pleases with her, and he can manage the dowager—he has proved it often enough. But he may try to go too far with the rest of us. To menace the Great Oaks is to offer an insult to the Bethells past all bearing. What will the manor be, robbed of them? There must be some way of putting a

curb on the interloper's extravagance, and by hook or by crook they shall be saved."

"My sympathies go with you in this instance," said my husband mildly.

"The sympathies of every man of sense and feeling in the county *must* be with me!" cried our visitor, gesticulating nervously as he contemplated his injuries. "If it please God that so events should turn, and Stoneleigh revert to me, I should be an embarrassed man all my days. You have no notion how Barrington is encumbering the property. Seventeen years of mal-appropriation and neglect have brought one of the finest inheritances in the kingdom almost to bankruptcy. A generation will not retrieve his iniquities. But nothing, *nothing* yet has provoked me like his insolent menace to the Great Oaks! I hear that he has sold them as they stand—in the lot—bark and timber—just as a man might sell a fir-copse at his son's majority that he had planted at his birth, to make him a little purse to begin life with!"

It was almost cruel to speak of anything but the one thing that possessed Mr. Tom Bethell's

mind ; but the poor angry man was growing livid and tremulous in his excitement, and I was quite thankful to change the subject when Susan announced that luncheon was on the table. As we adjourned to the dining-room, I began to inquire about his wife and children. He had commonly abundance to say concerning them, but now he was short in his answers. Grace was well, and all her little brood were thriving. Rose and Blanche had a new German maid ; Rose was a good girl, and well-disposed to the young fry : Blanche was foolish, and would give him some trouble, he feared, before she would be wiser.

“ There it is again, you see,” he continued, with a revival of vehemence. “ Those two girls have their fortunes from their mother, quite independent of me. At one-and-twenty they are free as air—may marry the first penniless adventurer who takes their fancy. They are not such catches as their cousin Felicia, but they have more than enough to entice men for their money’s sake. Gracie’s girls, poor souls, won’t have sixpence to help them to husbands, and what I shall do when

the boys want to go to school, the Lord only knows ! I suppose we shall have to live at Bedford or Tunbridge to take advantage of a cheap grammar-school—those refuges for destitute fathers and widowed mothers of superfluous sons."

"Your boys might do worse than have their education at Bedford or Tunbridge," said Arthur.

"Very true. I believe it is much the same as at Eton—only we Bethells have always been Etonians. This is where it is—we want a radical reform in the laws of property. Wilfred and I were equally my father's sons, but he had the luck to get ten years' start of me into the world—that's all. Yet think what has devolved on a woman merely because she is Wilfred's daughter, and must devolve on a woman again because she is Wilfred's gran'daughter, while my four boys may emigrate to the colonies, or work for a living at home, or loaf about and starve. It is not justice, no, and it is not common sense ! Land ought to be settled exclusively on male heirs. It is not to be tolerated that a woman should carry off all the

estates of an ancient family tacked to her petticoat, to enrich an alien : and it will not be tolerated much longer either, when there are male representatives surviving.

Once embarked in a discussion of the laws of primogeniture poor Tom Bethell never knew where to stop. The end of luncheon did not release us from his burdensome company. It was four o'clock when he suddenly broke the tangled thread of his discourse, and said that *now* he might present himself at the Manor. Mrs. Barrington was to be seen of an afternoon, if ever, and he was resolved not to go away from Stoneleigh until he had set her duty as a Bethell towards the Great Bethell Oaks uncompromisingly before her. And then, all in a hurry, he left us.

It is not very material what passed at the interview between Mr. Tom Bethell and his niece, for a tragical event that befel in the course of the next week averted for a time the mischief that he had come over to declaim against. This event forms a memorable epoch in the annals of Stoneleigh.

Both lame Simeon and Tom Bethell, in speaking of the cutting-down of the Great Oaks, had referred to Benson, the wood-steward, as being very "low" about the task laid upon him; but neither Arthur nor I gave the expression any heed until Sunday morning after service, when we saw the old man in the churchyard. He was sitting on the wall against our garden, with his face set towards the hill, and when we asked him how he did, he muttered a few half articulate words, to the effect that his head was bad, and the world was all going round with him. Arthur invited him to come in and dine with our servants, and he spent the afternoon dozing by the fire.

"It will do him good," cook said, "for he was in a sad taking about the Great Oaks."

Arthur had some talk with him before he left, and said to me: "Clare, we must keep an eye on Benson. He is far from well. Mind, I go or send to-morrow for Dr. Fowler to see him."

Dr. Fowler came, and reported nothing seriously amiss. The wood-steward was about in the village

all the day, which passed over without any marked incident.

I had not been to the manor since the previous Friday. I had been deterred from going by a fear lest I might intrude on a distress that I could not mitigate. Mrs. Barrington never sought for relief to her burdened mind in complaint against her husband ; she was loyal to him to her last breath ; but she would talk much and anxiously of the future of their daughter, and Felicia was all her theme when next I saw her. She sent for me, with an invitation to afternoon tea on the Tuesday—the third day after lame Simeon had announced the condemnation of the Great Oaks—and I went.

The poor lady was lying on her couch in her usual place when Carr, her maid, led me up to the boudoir. Felicia also was in the room, standing at the oval window—a small window, set in an angle of the wall, which framed a lovely picture of the Langhill, where it sunk down into the valley' on the west. She was making a study in water-colours of the evening autumnal sky-tints—glowing red and purple and

dusky gold behind the Great Oaks, marshalled on the slanting-ridge to the hill-foot. There, the formal avenue was broken into clumps and single trees, dotting the pasture-fields to the brink of the river. She brought it to me for my opinion. It was very prettily done; there was real feeling in it. Some expression of herself penetrated all that Felicia did. And I remember how lovingly her mamma listened to her art-prattle, how lovingly her eyes lingered on every movement and gesture of her darling as she went about afterwards, putting by her books, her painting-gear, and other appliances of her day's-lessons.

Carr brought in tea just as she had finished, and she asked if she might stay and pour it out for us : a request that be sure was granted. Was there anything her mamma could have denied her ? but then the dear child never asked anything amiss. At last, she went out, and as her voice, breaking into a song, died away in the distance of the house, Mrs. Barrington began to speak.

"Cousin Clare, I have something to say to you—come a little closer: I am tired, and talking hurts me, but I must not let another day pass—for who can tell what may happen to-morrow! I have had a strange heaviness on me since Saturday, and Dr. Lloyd looks grave: I caught Carr crying this morning too, and I was at no loss to understand why when she pretended to be more than commonly cheerful. As if they could deceive me! Alas, I know that my life draws towards its end!"

Ah, how regretful was her voice! The tears were in her eyes, and in mine. I could not utter a word. She continued to speak clearly and freely, though her countenance was full of emotion.

"When I am gone, they will give you a letter in which I have set down a few of my wishes about Felicy. I *wish* it had been God's good pleasure to spare me a year or two longer for her sake—but I will not repine! It is a comfort to me to leave you at the rectory:—promise me, Cousin Clare, that you will never let my Felicy want for

the counsel and countenance of a friend while you live?"

"I never will," said I with fervent purpose. She had laid this pledge upon me many times before, but never, I think, so solemnly.

"After *you*, I trust Carr and Janet to be good to my child. My husband has given me his word that, so far as it depends upon him, those two excellent young women shall be continued always in her service. They are sisters, and more faithful, fond hearts my sweet darling can never attach to her.—I dare not say that I *fear* for her; I trust God for her, as for all else; but, as my poor Uncle Tom preaches, it is a perilous lot for a girl to be very rich. If I were sovereign, I would rule that no woman should inherit a fortune of more than five thousand pounds, and then she would escape the danger of being either loved or hated for her money. But I cannot alter what is. Felicia must step into my place—Heaven grant that it may be no more difficult to her than it has been to me. But, Cousin Clare, it will, *it will!*"

This presentiment, as I perceived, gloomed very darkly on the dying lady's mind. What had been often painful as between husband and wife, would be cruel, as between father and daughter; and the mother foresaw that the weaker, more loving warm nature would have to suffer and endure. Well! it is by suffering the saints are purified: out of endurance that they are made strong.

Her thoughts diverged by-and-by to simpler and nearer concerns. The far future she must leave, must let go out of her hands; but there were things of the time present that she could speak of with expectation that her desires might prevail. One charge in particular she gave me.

"If Felicy must have any lady set over her at the Manor, any companion by way of *chaperone*, let it not be my mother's factotum, Miss Reed. I cannot say this to my mother, who believes in her, but I say it to you, Cousin Clare, who are not so easy to hoodwink. If any one is proposed, it will be Miss Reed—and Felicy does not love her—reason sufficient for keeping them apart. Janet and Carr, who are sagacious and true as

the daylight, are jealous of her with a singular repugnance, and I myself have no faith in her principles, and shrink from her purring flattery. I rely on you to resist her introduction into this house, if ever it be suggested."

I signified my acquiescence. Apparently my quiet distaste for Miss Reed was not a prejudice peculiar to me. Mrs. Barrington felt it more personally and distinctly, whose opportunities of deciphering her character had been twice as frequent and intimate as mine.

I cannot recollect that anything further of importance was spoken of between us on this occasion.

The Great Oaks were not mentioned.

As I took my way home across the churchyard, I looked up to the twilight shades upon the hill whence the sunset glories were all departed, and was just a thought surprised to see coming down slowly a cluster of figures carrying a burden. I cannot say that any terror or foreboding was upon me, though I stayed in the porch outside to watch them. A minute or two, and I recognized Arthur

amongst the bearers of the heavy load, then lame Simeon. They came towards the wicket that communicated with our garden, and I advanced a few steps till Arthur signed to me to go back—to go indoors. I knew then that what they were carrying was the lifeless body of a man.

I averted my eyes. A score of dismal possibilities coursed through my mind. Who was it? Susan met me in the passage, with a scared face.

“It is poor Benson, ma’am,” said she, and lifted her apron to her eyes. The girl was trembling all over. Something dreadful had happened.

I sat down in the drawing-room, and waited for Arthur. It was nearly an hour before he appeared. It seemed like three. I was about to ask him if the old man was dead, when he stopped my mouth from inquiry by saying: “Hush, Clare—he was surely out of his mind when he did it.”

The end of that sad day’s work was a coroner’s inquest, a funeral, much ghastly whispered talk

and a reprieve for the Great Bethell Oaks. But the village sweethearts have never walked on the Langhill on summer Sundays since that fatal afternoon; and it is commonly reported amongst the superstitious gossips that the place is haunted.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE WINTER WEATHER.

It was Christmas, and there was deep snow upon the ground when the next memorable event befel at Stoneleigh. The Manor pew was full that day at morning-service. Mrs. Bethell and Miss Reed had come over with visitors from the Dower House, and Mr. Barrington was there with Felicia. Besides these appeared the ruddy round brown face of George Sylvester who was at home from Eton for the holidays. He had walked all the way from Bylands through the snow, he told me afterwards. Bylands was four miles off, and George, being his father's third and youngest son, had no mount of his own, and cheerfully rode Shank's nag when he could not borrow one. He

was a favourite at the Manor. He had once had an accident with his gun in the woods near, and they had nursed him there till he was recovered. Since then Felicia and he had called each other by their names, like brother and sister, and Mrs. Barrington always spoke of him as "George."

In the course of the afternoon, while Arthur was reading to me, Miss Reed stole in on our quiet fireside entertainment—literally, *stole in*; for a low tap on the window-pane was our first warning of her, and the next minute she entered the drawing-room unannounced, except by herself.

"I thought I should take you by surprise," said she, assuming that the surprise must be surely a delight. She had an impertinent familiarity of manner that I could with difficulty tolerate, but no coldness had any effect in discouraging her airs of intimacy. She accepted the chair Arthur offered her, and inquired how we did with all the cordiality of a dear friend.

"How welcome is the presence of those we love at this season! and how have you both been lately? There has been sad trouble at Stoneleigh

since last we met—has there not? I have longed to see you, but you know how very, very seldom I can be spared, and will have excused me—I wish everybody was as indulgent! But this morning while I was dressing, I said to myself: ‘The afternoon will be an opportunity—at the Manor, Mrs. Bethell will have her daughter and her sweet Felicia, and I shall run across to the Rectory, and spend a salutary hour with the good rector and his nice little wife.’ And pray how is the baby, the darling boy, the precious, wee Johnny? I must not forget the baby! It would never do to forget the baby, would it?”

Miss Reed’s interest in our nursery being appeased, the “good rector,” with a sportive malice, told our visitor that his “nice little wife” would be happy in her charming society, but, for himself, he was afraid he must relinquish the pleasure of it; for he had to give a short service in the school-room at half-past three for the sake of a few old cottagers who could not get up the hill to church in bad weather. And then away he went—full ten minutes earlier than he

need have gone. In fact, Arthur distrusted himself when exposed to Miss Reed's inquisitorial ways; he said it required the tact of another woman to fence with her dexterously enough to avoid coming to a fight *à outrance*; and so he left her to me.

Nothing is more odious to me than the affectionateness of a person I dislike. Alone with me, Miss Reed was affectionate both in word and deed. The door had hardly closed upon Arthur, when she was impelled to rise from her seat, to lay hold of my two hands with a tender vehemence, and then to kiss me. Her effusiveness abated as suddenly as it had risen, but instead of throwing me off my guard, as it was meant to do, of opening my heart and relaxing my lips, it only provoked me to caution, and doubled my wariness. At that moment I should have enjoyed a quarrel with her—but Arthur had bound me over to keep the peace. He considered her a dangerous woman, and kept her as distant as he was able, without committing himself to the risks of a breach—which, besides,

would have been as unseemly, in our position, as it would have been perilous.

I invited my visitor to take her warm velvet bonnet off while she stayed, and her compliance was immediate. "I will, dear, for the weight incommodes me," said she; and suiting the action to the word, she laid her fashionable head-gear in Arthur's empty chair, and revealed to my observation a neat skull-cap of net, with an opening behind for her scanty knot of yellow hair to come through, and a space in front wide enough to admit a tier of gauzy curls. She was very ugly, the worst of her ugliness being the clay-blue leathery tint and texture of her skin in contrast with her yellow hair. Her eyes were greenish-grey, the brows and lashes redly defined; for the rest, her features were large and strongly marked. She was a woman whom you might hate easily, but whom, if you undertook to despise her, you must despise with a latent dread. For the lips that could kiss and purr with carneying enthusiasm could open and shut in savage, biting words, and under that stolid exterior there burned

a restless, envious, bitter, cruel heart. God forgive *me* if I wrong her! God forgive *her* if I have interpreted her subtle secret arts and acts aright! When I remember certain things I can hardly keep a curb on my indignation——

But I will go back to that Christmas afternoon when we sat by my drawing-room fire, and she talked of the people at the Manor as one who belonged to them by use and custom, by love and ties of gratitude and loyalty.

“Of course, dear, I am at home in the family. Mrs. Bethell has no concealments from me, and seeks my advice on all occasions. ‘What would *you* do, Reed?’ is for ever on her lips; and when the advice is as between two whose interests are opposed, it is my endeavour to hold the balance even, and to help her to decide justly. It is a responsibility, a grave responsibility, but I do not shrink from it — one ought not to shrink from the serious duties that may arise in a long service. Seventeen years ago, when I went to the Dower House, the excellent dowager would have taken me up pretty sharply had I dared to

offer an opinion on matters the most trifling : but it is different now, very different now. She feels that her world is my world : that all my devotion and desires are linked with her own and with those of the Bethells. And I am proud to feel that I have the good-will of the whole circle ; Mr. Tom has a gracious word for me always, and even Mr. Barrington never passes me without a civil inquiry after my health. It is much to say, dear Mrs. Gower, that two gentlemen who are at daggers-drawn between themselves, should make a point of being friendly in their behaviour to me. I am inclined sometimes to lay it all to the account of their value for dear Mrs. Bethell, and then again I think they have discerned that I am a useful, unobtrusive person, with a few simple virtues of my own, which keep things smooth in the family, where (you know it as well as I) there are many elements of discord ready to break out into open and violent contention."

I had nothing to reply to this flux of platitudes, so I held my tongue ; and after a pause of musing meditation, accompanied by a gentle deprecating

movement of her head and a dry twinkling of her eyes, Miss Reed continued her monologue; the drift of which, I began to perceive, was to impress me with a sense of her own vast consideration and importance at the Dower House and at the Manor.

“The Great Bethell Oaks now—I daresay it never occurred to you that I had a hand and voice in staying their destruction?”

It certainly never had.

“All the world of hereabouts supposes that Mr. Barrington spares them, daunted by the wretched old wood-steward’s having hanged himself on the Langhill. Nothing of the sort! Mr. Barrington is not a man to be deterred from a bad purpose—from any purpose—by another poor creature’s calamity: indeed, I know it for a fact that he said Benson’s suicide was a reason the more for their coming down—and down assuredly they would have come, if he had had his will of them. It is not necessary to remind you how adverse Mr. Tom Bethell was; I never witnessed a man more angry—more *righteously* angry, I may say. He saw Mrs. Barrington, he

saw Mr. Barrington, and spoke his mind without compromise; he even laid the burden on darling little Felicia, who quite entered into his sentiments, and he came finally to the Dower House, to plead there. 'What do *you* think, Reed?' the dear dowager asked me in her perplexity. 'It is *impossible* that Stoneleigh should be robbed of its noblest ornament to pay the debts of an *alien*,' said I, and that was the last word of the whole matter. Mr. Tom Bethell was present, and thanked me with much emotion. 'Miss Reed, you speak like an honest woman, and a woman of courage'—that was what he said. And I had the approval of my own conscience too. The dowager talked to her poor daughter, and Mr. Barrington was denied the authority he wanted to fell the trees; they were as safe as ever they were in their lives when that miserable Benson——Yes, yes, you shrink from a repetition of the sad history, and well you may! Let us have done with it, and pass to a pleasanter subject. How do you think the dear lady at the Manor is? I had not the honour of seeing

her at luncheon. She sent for that cub, George Sylvester, but after her little interview with him, she felt herself too tired to receive me. 'She must defer it to another occasion,' was the message."

I replied that the poor lady was fast wearing away—that her present sickness was for death, I feared.

"One does not like to contemplate it—she is still a young woman—not forty yet. It will make a wonderful change at the Manor—is it known whether Mr. Barrington will continue to reside there?"

I could not gratify my visitor's curiosity even by a speculation. I was gazing into the fire, but was conscious nevertheless of her eyes gleaming and peering inquisitively into my face. Miss Reed gave me credit for being a "nice little woman," but if she had expressed her whole mind concerning me she would have added that I was a rather silly little woman. She was one of those people so excessively wise in their own conceit that they overlook the possible sagacity of

their neighbours, and darken their own really shrewd perceptions by contempt for other folks' discernment. I am sure that it never occurred to Miss Reed that I might be acute enough to see through her—and probably I was not on all occasions; but I saw through her clearly now when she went on to say that “the sweet and lovely Felicia,” deprived of her mamma, would be too young yet by many a year to take upon her the dignity of Lady of the Manor.

“It would be essential that she should have about her a gentlewoman of experience and tact, for oh! what snares are spread for the unwary in these self-seeking days!” cried she, with a moral air.

“I imagine that the perils of an heiress are much the same as they always were,” said I.

“Ah, my dear Mrs. Gower, you are so innocent of the world! The dear dowager will never be drawn from the agreeable seclusion of the Dower House at her age; but she is sensible how carefully Felicia will need to be guarded in the budding years of her life, poor sensitive darling!

She was good enough to observe to me the other day, 'Who could be fitter for that delicate office than myself—bound up as I am in every thought and feeling with the family?' I have reason also to believe that Mr. Tom Bethell regards me as the one suitable person——"

"Is it not a little premature to discuss these arrangements?" I interrupted.

"They will have to be discussed—I may even venture to say that they have been discussed already. To remain at the Dower House would please me best; but if the sacrifice of going to the Manor to take charge of dear Felicia be required of me, I trust that I shall be able to make it in a right spirit."

"It is very unlikely that it will be required of you," said I, not unwilling to dissipate a vain hope.

Miss Reed coloured, and glanced at me keenly. "What do you know? Is it determined that I shall not be offered the appointment?" she asked, in a sharp, surprised voice.

This was one of her direct queries, such as threw

Arthur into perplexity. To answer it was to violate a confidence, to refuse to answer it was to acquiesce in what it assumed. I was vexed, and did not refrain from showing it, which served for the occasion better than word-fencing. With the curt impatience of a woman provoked, I told her that I would not talk of the private affairs of the Manor, and especially that I would not talk of matters contingent on an event which would bereave me of one of my best and dearest friends.

She was rather confounded, and answered me with eager deprecating good-humour; perceiving, perhaps, that she had overshot her mark. "I wish everybody in your situation was gifted with the like discretion, and the like sympathy, dear Mrs. Gower. You are so kind that I need not beg of you to make allowance for the anxiousness of a poor dependent. It is true that my comforts at the Dower House are many, but the *honorarium* is very small, and I have the future to provide for." Here she was silent and crestfallen, and the interest of her visit seemed to be gone.

She sat on, however, till the edge of dark, and only made a movement to depart, when the front door was opened hastily, and somebody with a quick resounding step came into the hall. It was not Arthur, for the step halted and hesitated, and then a boyish voice that I knew cried out half-diffidently, "Mrs. Gower, Mrs. Gower! where are you? You are wanted!"

"It is that young Sylvester. What can his errand be?" said Miss Reed.

I opened the drawing-room door, and there was George, red and hurried. "Come, come quickly—to the Manor—come as you are—they sent me to bring you," stammered he in painful excitement. His hands shook as he lifted a plaid of Arthur's from a nail in the passage, and wrapt it about me.

"Is anything the matter? Has anything happened?" asked Miss Reed. "Wait for me one minute! I'll go with you—*do* wait!" she vociferated with breathless energy.

"*You* are not wanted—we cannot wait," said George, and heedless of her pitiful beseechings,

he hurried me out into the winter dusk to obey my summons. No need had I to inquire what it meant.

I can still see the gloomy shadow of the Lang-hill, and of the Great Oaks against the sky: I can still feel the crisp cold airs that trembled in the churchyard yews, and hear the loud, moaning gusts in the avenue, when I recall that tramp in the dusk through the snow to the Manor. The bye-paths had not been swept, and we went the shortest way. Of late days a certain negligence had prevailed in the household rule, as if everybody waited, expectant of an event. And now the event was here. George told me as we were going that all at once the change had come, that Mrs. Barrington was dying, and had called for me. The house was not yet lighted up when we arrived; several servants stood about in the hall, and Janet was on the watch for me.

"There is no time to spare," she said, as she conducted me upstairs. "Already I am afraid it is too late."

We paused a moment at the chamber-door that I might collect myself, and then went in.

It was too late. I never heard the voice of my friend again in articulate words. She knew me, but she was speechless. All those whom she most loved were there. Her mother was sitting at the head of the bed, half-hidden by the curtain, her husband stood full in her view and Felicia was kneeling with her face buried against the pillow. Janet and Carr were present besides, and the light in the room was only from the fire, and from a shaded lamp through the door ajar of the boudoir beyond it.

Consciousness survived the power of expression. The whitening lips moved as with an effort to utter, but no sound issued from them. We guessed at the name of George Sylvester, but could not be sure of it. The boy was outside in the gallery, crying as he had cried when his own mother was taken. Janet brought him in, and the lady's eyes rested on him for a minute, then turned as in search of some other person.

"It is you, Felicia," said the boy, shaking her.

gently by the shoulder. She stood up and leant against him.

At this instant entered Arthur—I know not where he had been to come so late. He spoke a few words, and we all knelt while he recited the prayers for the dying. As his voice ceased in the beautiful benediction, Carr opened the door, and we went out from the presence of the dead, weeping.

And yet it was a happy death—a death to be desired; painless, peaceful, blessed in the love of family and friends—and most blessed in the love of Christ our Saviour.

The first figure that met my view in the gallery was Miss Reed, and with the grotesque incongruity of thought which is often the rebound of overstrained solemn feeling, I noticed her rueful countenance under her velvet bonnet all awry; and our conversation at home recurred to me with the reflection that now the dear mistress was gone, it would be the policy of the humble companion to worm herself into the manor as Felicia's duenna, and that it must be my policy to defeat her machinations.

I hated myself for having such thoughts at such a time, but our hearts and minds are fearfully and wonderfully made, and others of us besides Charles Lamb may be inclined to laugh at a funeral, and yet not be destitute of natural feeling and affection.

CHAPTER V.

THE YOUNG LADY OF THE MANOR.

I WILL not linger on the details of this sad period. Mrs. Barrington was buried, not in the family vault below the chancel, but outside the walls of the church under the east window, that her husband might be buried by her when his time came. This was one of the requests of a letter which was left for him together with one for her daughter, and that she had said awaited me. It is not necessary that I should record her instructions in this place. They related in chief to Felicia, and were a repetition of what she had often spoken; but, of course, the wishes set down by the hand of the dead mother would carry more weight and authority with everybody

than my unwritten recollections could be expected to do.

The funeral was attended by every gentleman member of the Bethell family, near and remote in kinship, and they mustered a considerable clan of distant cousins when they were all assembled together. After they had dispersed again the Manor was left for six months in solitude. Mr. Barrington asked nobody's leave, but carried his daughter out of England, with Janet in attendance upon her, and they travelled through France and Italy, halting for a few days or weeks at a time, first in one city and then in another, until they came to Naples. Here Felicia had an attack of fever, and when she was recovered, her father brought her home by short stages through Switzerland and the Rhenish Provinces, and reappeared with her at Stoneleigh soon after midsummer. She was grown, and the touch of sun on her splendidly fair complexion, I thought an improvement to her beauty;—but she was still the girl—nothing yet of the woman about her.

I received many letters from Felicia during her absence abroad, but none, I think, of importance sufficient to be quoted. She was of a sweet happy temper, and had fewer disappointments and drawbacks in her minor pleasures than most of us can boast, but her account in her correspondence of what she saw and did was only in outline. She had confessed, however, to having set up a diary on the plan of one that her mamma had kept, and this volume, richly bound and gilt, she displayed to me at our first meeting. It was no depository of fine imaginings and tears, but a chronicle for anybody's inspection : a large quarto with illustrations in water-colour of picturesque scenery bits and autograph notes of travel, study, meetings and partings, and the myriad incidents which are trivial in themselves but note-worthy on the road. This diary with pen and pencil Felicia continued at intervals as long as she lived. It lay on a table in the boudoir to which she had succeeded as her own room, and probably most of her friends at one time or another have looked

through it. I have it now, and preserve it as the truest, tenderest relic of that true and tender persecuted soul.

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Barrington would live at Stoneleigh more constantly now than he had done during his wife's lifetime; and not a month had elapsed since his return from abroad, when we heard that he was going to take a trip to Homburg again. I immediately asked myself: And how about Felicia?

The dear girl came to me one morning in pouting, whimsical distress.

"Cousin Clare, papa wants to talk to you about me," she announced. "Grannie has been saying that if he leaves me here, I must have a duenna or go to school. I shall never go to school; mamma did not wish it. If *you* might be my duenna, I'd fall into love and allegiance on the spot; but Grannie proposes Miss Reed—isn't it dreadful? I know I should hate her! O! if pappy would but stay at home, how merry could I be with him for duenna! But my message is

that he is coming to consult you — at eleven o'clock—if you can see him."

Certainly I could, and I promised Felicia to be her advocate.

At the appointed time Mr. Barrington came. He was in a sprightly gay mood, and made no sign of sorrowful or sentimental recollections. Nor was his mourning obtrusive in his apparel.

"I invited Felicy to be present at our council, but she preferred to stay outside with Oscar and Sir Bevis. She told you, however, the burden of my complaint, Cousin Clare?" he began.

"Yes—and of her own: banishment to school or a duenna—and the duenna Miss Reed," said I. "So let me speak plainly at once, and tell you, if you are not aware of it, that one of the charges Felicia's mother laid on me was to oppose Miss Reed's promotion to any post of authority over her daughter, if such should ever be proposed. Both by word of mouth, and in her farewell letter to me, Mrs. Barrington was very earnest in this matter."

"I wonder why?" said my visitor with an

air of musing. "Reed seems an inoffensive creature, though sinfully ugly for a woman. But my wife had infinite discernment; I shall certainly not act contrary to her wishes in so delicate a business. Felicity dislikes her too, and tells me frankly that if she must have a companion, she would prefer somebody younger, prettier and livelier—quite natural that, and reasonable too. Well, Cousin Clare, can you name any fit person? for I cannot remain a prisoner at Stoneleigh all the year round, and the young Lady of the Manor, as I find the people have dubbed her, cannot be left quite alone with Carr and Janet, worthy good bodies as I know they are."

Now I had a certain person in my mind, a perfectly suitable person, and very near to myself: my eldest sister, a widow without children, whose husband, an officer of engineers, had died in India two years before. Helen was still young—not more than twenty-eight—and she was also accomplished, cheerful, sensible, and knew the world. Mrs. Barrington had manifested a decided partiality for her, and so had Felicia, during a long

visit that Helen had paid us at the Parsonage on her return alone from India. She was now living at Gladestone, solitary and impoverished. I regretted her close connection with myself, but after a minute's further thought and hesitation on that score, I mentioned her. Mr. Barrington caught at the idea.

"Your sister Helen—Mrs. Gresham? Cousin Helen—the very woman, and thank you, Cousin Clare! So vanish a hundred difficulties! She is a lady at all points, and as having been married, and seen something of this wicked world, she will be a proper dragon for my beautiful nymph. They can find nothing to say against her at the Dower House—but, if only for courtesy's sake, we must go through the form of consulting Mrs. Bethell, particularly as she has recommended Reed."

I agreed to that, as of course, and invited Helen to come over to the Parsonage. I was not, however, so sure as Mr. Barrington had shown himself that nothing would be found to say against her at the Dower House, though I scarcely anticipated

the storm of wrathful indignation that actually resulted from my licensed interference.

Of her own mind, it is my belief, that the dowager would have acquiesced in Helen's appointment as the very best that could be made. Felicia was glad of it, her papa was glad of it, and at the first mention Mrs. Bethell herself said: "Yes, I think it would be very nice, if it could be arranged. The dear child has taken to her, you say? and being a sort of cousin, her position in the neighbourhood will be pleasanter. Nobody can object to receive her, or to meet her.—Now poor Reed is not that kind of person, though she does very well for me, and I should, on the whole, be sorry to lose her." This was when the grand-mamma had not her factotum at her elbow; before anything had been promulgated beyond the Parsonage concerning Helen, and before her arrival there.

The dowager carried the news home, and the very next day she was at the Manor again, but with quite another story. "A handsome young widow who was certain to marry again at the

earliest opportunity was not, on second thoughts, the most desirable of watch-dogs—why she would need a watch-dog herself! In fact, there was a degree of impropriety on the face of the thing that would set all the world talking: and how bad, how deeply injurious that would be for poor little innocent Felicia!”

These notions were none of Mrs. Bethell's, were too contemptible to merit refutation. Yet the moment was critical, and I said, “Wait till you have seen Helen; a very brief acquaintance will convince you of the dignity of her character. Mrs. Barrington knew and approved her. She has the self-respect of a true woman, and a true lady. Your fears for her are groundless.”

“I will talk to Reed about it again: she may modify her opinion,” replied the dowager. “Yesterday she was shocked beyond measure, and convinced me that it would never do.”

“What concern is it of Miss Reed's?” I rejoined. “Except that she must lose the appointment, if Helen gain it, she has no personal interest in the matter.”

“And is not that interest enough to excuse a little prejudice against a rival candidate? Besides, you forget her attachment to the family, her long devotion to myself.”

I did not forget them, I only did not believe in them. This, however, I would not plead, nor did I wish to bring forward Mrs. Barrington's letter, if Miss Reed's ambition could be defeated by other means. To vex and insult her, to make an enemy of her for myself, and perhaps for Felicia, by letting her know how much she was disliked and distrusted by Felicia's mother, was a step that I felt anxiously desirous to avoid. Mr. Barrington, I was sure, would say nothing of his wife's private wishes expressed to me—expressed to me only, as I conjectured, that Miss Reed might not be wantonly injured in the esteem of those who had for so many years been satisfied with her service; but to reveal them to the dowager would be to reveal them to the whole world—she would go straight to her factotum with every word: and therefore I kept back my strongest argument to be employed only in the last resort

—and then, if requisite, to be employed in its full force.

Mrs. Bethell left me on this second occasion more than half of my way of thinking again. On the morrow Helen arrived at the Parsonage, and Mr. Barrington had some conversation with her—not quite satisfactory. I remember Helen remarking to me afterwards that he must be either a very weak man, or embarrassed by circumstances which disabled him from pursuing his own will steadily.

“He is *limp*,” said she. “Now I like clear, incisive action in a man.”

The fact was that the dowager had talked to him also, and not without effect. One sentiment she had propounded (I have no doubt it was put into her mouth) which had taken peculiar hold of him, and had quite paralysed his original resolution. “It ought not to be said that you have surrounded Felicia with a clique of your own relations: or we shall have a Bethell faction rising up against the Barrington faction—I am not sure that there is not one rising up already.”

"I desire nothing but to live at peace with my neighbours," was his answer to the insinuation, so insulting to his honour, that he was not fit to be entrusted, unwatched, with even the guardianship of his own child. He did not resent it—perhaps he did not dare resent it. He knew best.

There was a greater amount of talk expended over the selection of a duenna for the young lady of the Manor than over any event that had occurred in our neighbourhood since the last election for the county. Mr. Barrington grew sadly impatient of it, so impatient that I could see he was ready to succumb before the pressure of the Dower House, and put in Miss Reed.

"I cannot be kept dawdling here all the summer—this business must be settled out-of-hand now," he said, almost angrily at our last council of three upon it, held in the library at the Manor, present himself, the dowager, and myself. The dowager spoke next.

"No third person has been proposed or thought of; the choice lies where it has done from the beginning: between Reed and Mrs. Gresham.

Reed has my entire confidence, and I vote for her. Mrs. Gresham is a most charming and clever woman, but there are disadvantages in her case impossible to be overcome."

"Then Reed let it be. I have no objection I'm sure!" exclaimed Mr. Barrington, stretching his arms across the table with a fatigued air of resignation and relief.

"A moment's indulgence," said I, and produced my letter. It had become imperative. I think that Mr. Barrington had lost sight of his wife's wishes by this time; for he started, looked annoyed, and then, with a sort of stifled groan, bade me read the letter. I read the whole paragraph relating to the humble companion.

The dowager stared in consternation. "What does it mean?" she cried. "The poor harmless creature is not a viper! But Lucilla always had a quiet aversion for her, I know."

"Mrs. Barrington probably felt that a poor harmless creature was no suitable guide for her daughter," rejoined I. Mr. Barrington smiled. "She lays no charge against Miss Reed's temper

or character in this letter; and in her many conversations with me on the subject, she took no special ground of exception against her appointment, save that Felicia did not love her."

"That is true enough; Felicia cannot endure her," said Mr. Barrington.

"A mere childish vagary, adopted at second hand! What wrong has poor Reed done anybody that she should be put under the ban?" said the dowager. "She will be mightily enraged—I do not know how I shall tell her."

"Need she be told at all?" I asked.

"She will be sure to get to know," replied Mrs. Bethell. "Of course, Lucilla's voice must be obeyed. And as Reed is out of the question now, let us decide at once that Mrs. Gresham will do."

"So be it!" said Mr. Barrington. And the council broke up.

All in a hurry had vanished or been forgotten Helen's disadvantages that five minutes ago were impossible to be overcome. How people do hate trouble! Felicia proclaimed herself content, and

my sister removed to the Manor on the day that Mr. Barrington left Stoneleigh. Once the arrangement concluded, it seemed so simple and natural that it ceased to be a source of gossip. I did not pretend to conceal my own satisfaction in it. It was delightful to have Helen so near. I loved my sister, but had she been ten times my sister, I would not have helped to place her in her delicate and responsible position had I not known her to be worthy of it; to be of all women whom I knew intimately, the best adapted to sustain it with credit and dignity. She made herself very soon thoroughly liked and respected both within the Manor walls and round about; and after a brief interval Mrs. Bethell privately congratulated herself to me on having put Felicia under such admirable tutelage.

Miss Reed wisely kept a quiet tongue concerning her defeat. The only reference she made to it in my hearing while the smart was new was an inquiry pointed at me with a significant smile in the midst of a large company of young folks assembled in celebration of Felicia's birthday.

Perhaps she meant it for a riddle: riddles and enigmas were our talk just then.

"What is worse than a snake in the grass, Mrs. Gower?" she asked.

"To poachers in my coverts Jowler would be much worse — that good dog!" cried Felicia.

"We have no venomous snakes at Stoneleigh—I have seen nasty slow-worms down by the Round Pool at grannie's, though."

Whether the dear girl had understood the mean insinuation, and intended to repel it for me, I cannot be sure, but I remember fancying so at the time. Felicia was ever a staunch partisan for her friends.

CHAPTER VI.

IDYLLIC.

Two quiet uneventful years of which there is not much to tell followed on Mrs. Gresham's appointment. She acquired a most salutary influence with her young charge, whose education was carried forward with a vigilant industry. Felicia was a girl to profit by wise instruction. I must not profess that her learning was either very deep or very high, but she had a good conversational knowledge of many things, and one supreme talent — a passionate love of music and an exquisite voice. She went to London at intervals with Helen for lessons with masters, and did not waste her opportunities. Her life was simple, regular, refined, and she did not show

herself in any haste to change its pleasant seclusion for the gaieties of the great world.

But there came a day at length when her grand-mamma said : " Felicia is nearly eighteen—it is time she was presented at court. Mrs. Gresham, we must go to town in May this year. Her papa—like all papas, is slow to realize her as a grown-up young woman, and would like to delay the event of her coming-out for another season ; but I tell him, no : she must be presented this season, and presented by myself. I begin to grow old, and am warned not to put off my duty. I know Lucilla would wish me to perform it if she could speak to say so, poor dear."

Felicia heard her fate with a sort of trembling joy. It was but natural that in her buoyant youth, health and spirits, she should look forward with a gentle triumph to her emancipation. Still she was not sanguinely hopeful as some girls are when new to the vast possibilities of life. She had learnt what true sorrow was at the death of her mother, and was being well-taught how to deny herself by her father, whose systematic

indulgence of his own whims had already inured her to small disappointments.

Except for a little while in the partridge-shooting, a little while in the hunting season, for a week at the assizes when he was high sheriff, and another week during a county election, when all the world was aglow with the contest, Mr. Barrington had not been at Stoneleigh during the last twelve months. The Manor was very quiet during his long absences, not to say dull, but Felicia had leave to invite her friends to garden-parties and other festive celebrations in a simple way—a leave of which she availed herself quite as often as Mrs. Gresham thought desirable. George Sylvester made himself Felicia's right-hand on these occasions, and she used him like a good-natured brother. People must talk, and some said already that these two were engaged: that Mrs. Barrington on her deathbed had expressed a wish for their union—a pure invention, but probable enough to be believed; and it was believed in several quarters. It was nonsense, however; George still thought more of his dog

and gun than of any lady, and Felicia had no heart that she was yet aware of to give away. Their frank attachment was just a pretty overture before the curtain drew up, and the lights were turned full upon the stage; and perhaps there was no sweeter truer music in all Felicia's life than its soft unimpassioned strains.

If we could look forward into the future should we guide our steps more discreetly, I wonder! The chances are that we should be afraid to move at all, and perhaps that is why Providence has shrouded it so completely from our ken. How could I foresee that in bringing my sister Helen to the Manor I was weaving the threads of Felicia's destiny? Helen was all I said, and more, in goodness, duty and fidelity to her charge, yet I have nothing to answer to the pregnant *if* with which Miss Reed has taunted me since. "*If Mrs. Gresham had never come to Stoneleigh, Felicia's life would never have been so disastrously wrecked.*" It was a presumptuous word to say, but it was said and echoed—and I record it,

recording also that it does not trouble my conscience one whit. I do not profess to be one of the initiated into the secret counsels of God, but my reason revolts against the notion that He, the All-Wise and Almighty, can permit the happiness or misery of a life to hinge upon such an *if*.

With her presentation at court and her first season in London impending who could ever have expected that the curtain would draw up at Stoneleigh, and the opening scenes of the play be laid on the green lawns at the Manor? What a caprice of fate it seemed that Felicia, fancy-free until within a few days of her departure for town, should go with heart and mind pre-occupied, as I know she did.

We were in the last week of April, a lovely April that year; everything was forward in the gardens and in the woods, and the evenings were balmy enough to sit out of doors, and enjoy the fresh splendour of the spring. Felicia was taking her ease just then, in anticipation of her hard labour at pleasure in town, and her way of taking her ease was to keep open house for her friends.

Mr. Tom Bethell was at Ringwood, and Rose and Blanche were with him; the girls were sociable, and came to and fro every day, more or less, to the great advancement of impromptu matches at croquet and archery—sports that Felicia and Rose excelled in. George Sylvester also made a frequent appearance, and the young Claylands and Aber-shaws with their several companions, both boys and girls, some launched in the world, but more in the adolescent stage. Felicia talked of this interlude as her last *real* holiday, and professed that it behoved her to make the best of it. “Have you not told me a hundred times that these are my happiest days?” she said, appealing the case. Perhaps we had—but I cannot recollect that she had ever testified much faith in this stereotyped assurance.

It was on a Monday morning—exactly a week before they left Stoneleigh—that I met Helen and Felicia in the village by accident, and Helen said to me, as by a sudden thought prompting her, when we were in the act of parting: “Come across to the Manor this afternoon, if you have leisure.

Poor Paul is going to drive over with George Sylvester for a little change and variety, and we can amuse him while the rest are at their everlasting croquet."

The gentleman Helen alluded to as "poor Paul" was her brother-in-law, Captain Gresham, who had fought through the Crimean war from its beginning almost to its close, when he was desperately wounded at the attack on the Redan. After a few weeks in hospital he had been sent home, and was now at Bylands, under the care of the vicar, whose elder son had fallen in the famous assault out of which Captain Gresham had escaped with two terrible wounds, and laurels and fame enough for a veteran. I inquired if the hero was in a fair way to make a good recovery:—I had heard his praises continually, but had never seen him yet, though he was only four miles off. Felicia listened with sympathetic eyes.

"Yes," said Helen, "he will be his own man again very soon now, they hope; but he still frets and chafes dreadfully at the war having come to an end in his absence. He is a thorough

soldier, just like my dear James." She gave a sigh to the retrospect, of which she was proud, nevertheless, and then we went our separate ways.

From my nursery window I saw the Ringwood and Abershaw girls, and the Bylands dog-cart drive past to the Manor between three and four o'clock, and as my surest idle time was then, while my little Jack and Nellie were taking their siesta, I was not long in following. They had not got to croquet yet: indeed, it seemed as if play would be at a discount that afternoon; for all the girls were gathered in the shadow of the plane-tree on the upper terrace, where Captain Gresham had been put down to rest after the heat and fatigue of his short journey. He was tired to faintness at his arrival, and George Sylvester had been well scolded for not contriving otherwise; but now he was refreshed with wine and fruit, and reclining on a scarlet carriage-rug, was enacting the part of a languid Othello to half-a-dozen admiring Desdemonas. They made a pretty unconscious picture—the girls in dimity white dresses and straw hats, leaning one against another about the dark recum-

bent figure—and the rippling green of the foliage overhead, and behind the group, harmonized the scene delightfully.

Yet Helen, I thought, looked not quite happy presiding over it. “Go to your games, and let the poor fellow have some peace,” said she, waving them off half-disdainfully.

“Peace is what Captain Gresham cannot endure!” exclaimed Rose Bethell. “If he may not be in the thick of a fight, he is best pleased to talk of battles and sieges.”

The Bethell and Abershaw girls were on intimate terms with our hero already. Felicia and he now met for the first time. But she was as much fascinated as any of them, and seemed to hang upon his words. I knew that he was bold as a lion, and that greybeards spoke honour of this stripling for his courage and dash, or else I might have been tempted to make fun of his pathetic airs, his soft eyes, his dejected mouth—not so firm then as I have seen it since. George Sylvester was quite out of favour for the hour, and he and Tom Claylands knocked the

croquet-balls about by themselves for a long while before they could engage any partners. Helen, at length, succeeded in dispersing and employing the guests ; but Felicia still sat on, her graceful, drooping figure and attentive face expressive of the kindest feeling. She had no idea how sweetly she looked, how considerately she listened and replied. Captain Gresham was suffering, and hiding it with all his might, and she was pitiful beyond words to utter her pity. She let no one serve him but herself. When tea was brought out upon the lawn, she selected a cup, put in cream and sugar, and gave it to him with her own hand. Rose Bethell and Kate Abershaw watching them in a pause of their game, envied her the gentle service.

Helen was quiet, so very quiet that I was sure she was ill at ease. But she did not interfere. Now and then she spoke, and in her accustomed way, she said, "Poor Paul" both in addressing him and in referring to him. "Poor Paul ! when are they going to let your hair grow ?" and "Poor Paul is not satisfied with glory, though one might think that he had had enough at the price."

"Why do you say 'Poor Paul and poor Paul?' I am not sorry for myself, and I don't love that sort of soothing," said he, at last, with some show of temper. Though refined by a long anguish the young hero's countenance betrayed him as still a little lower than the angels. He had masculine arrogance and all masculine qualities in full measure, there could be no doubt of it when one observed the lines of his visage.

Helen blushed. "It shall be 'Paul' now, or 'Captain Gresham,' if you prefer it," said she, apologetically. "But it seems only the other day that you were a boy, joining your regiment, and going out to the Crimea, and you came home to us so helpless." This was not like Helen's tact. She was confused, and said what she would rather not have said.

Captain Gresham's brow did not clear. Promotion comes quickly in the field before the enemy, and though he had won his company, he was still youthful enough not to relish being reminded of it in society where he wished to be approved. "One is not to be always a boy, nor always

helpless," said he, in a testy tone. "I don't know why I am lounging here like a great baby instead of taking my part in that game. I came over with Sylvester on purpose for croquet."

"They don't want you—you must not spoil the game they are playing," said Felicia, and they both smiled.

A sort of freemasonry is so soon established between young people, and it did not appear that Captain Gresham disliked sympathy and compassion as expressed in Felicia's face.

The sun began to decline, and all at once the evening air breathed chill. The convalescent shivered, and Helen whispered aside to me, "Oh, how I wish Paul had never come! He was not up to the exertion, and there is the drive back to Bylands. He shall not go in the dog-cart; I will send him in the close carriage."

"Suppose we keep him at the Rectory, and send him home to-morrow?" I suggested.

"I do believe that would be the wiser plan, if he will consent. And George can explain without alarming Mr. Willis." Helen acceded

to my proposal, but with an evident doubt of its expedience. I had no idea that she would have been so quickly suspicious: I knew what she was fearing about now.

Captain Gresham heard my invitation with cheerfulness; he appeared glad to be spared the fatigue of moving far just then, and George Sylvester was only too thankful to be quit of his responsibility.

"If I could have guessed that Gresham was such a brittle specimen, I would never have taken him in charge I promise you, Mrs. Gower," cried the frank-spoken young fellow. "You are sure to have Mr. Willis over in the morning, and meanwhile, all you have to do with Gresham is to send him to bed early, and give him lots to eat and drink. And the doctor said he was not to be contradicted."

Everybody laughed. At this moment arrived Arthur, and urged by Helen, with the help of his stout arm, Captain Gresham walked at once to the Rectory. It struck me at the time that he had a satisfaction in remaining on the spot

which its obvious attractions and his personal requirements scarcely accounted for. And yet, in my own mind, I laughed at Helen for disquieting herself. But Helen, as she was larger in her views, was also shrewder in her perceptions than myself. And if there were not what we call a *fate* in these things, it would have been better for us all that Captain Gresham should have incurred the risk of returning to Bylands that night, instead of staying within reach of the Manor.

We did not count on keeping our guest beyond the next day, but he had a will of his own, and a wish to gratify, and the consequence was that Mr. Willis had to resign him to our mercies, till the end of the week.

“This is a delicious air; I feel a healthy exhilaration in it that is wanting at Bylands,” said the convalescent most ungratefully, for I am sure Bylands had saved his life.

“Almost any change is salutary at your stage of recovery, my dear boy. It acts as a tonic both

on mind and body," replied Mr. Willis; and Arthur immediately put in his word and said that Captain Gresham must prolong his visit until he was tired of us.

My first thought was, how would Helen like it? And then I was vexed with myself for encouraging such foolish, fantastic notions at the expense of our credit for hospitality. Captain Gresham waited for me to second Arthur's invitation, and I did it with, perhaps, a warmer cordiality, because I was conscious of having hesitated. He thanked us, and when Mr. Willis was gone he proceeded to leave us at liberty for our duties, and to make himself at home by lounging into the garden. It did not surprise me to hear by and by that he had strayed away to the more spacious lawns of the Manor; that Felicia had met him in her noon ramble, and had graciously made him free of the fine tonic air which he had found so beneficial yesterday.

It is not easy, when we have become intimate with a friend and his affairs, to go back to original impressions. Yet I do remember feeling in those

first days of our acquaintance that Captain Gresham was a man to be either heartily loved or else not to be loved at all. He was anything rather than insignificant. No one could fail to see him when he was there, and to have a sentiment towards him, whether they knew him little or much. Arthur took to the young fellow amazingly. He was an agreeable guest in a house and capital company at the breakfast-table, while he was in his morning spirits and vigour. He always flagged before night. He had an immense physical loss to make up ere he would be really himself again ; but the surgeons promised him a complete and permanent recovery, with time, care, and patience, and all that could be done for him now lay in the restorative influences of air, food, and cheerful quiet. And these he enjoyed at Stoneleigh ; amongst us, we certainly did him good.

He could not be at the Manor the whole day long, and when he was not there, what he liked best was to lie under the trees in some sheltered warm nook, and talk to us of himself. Yes, to

talk of himself, past, present, and future. And we encouraged him. When anybody has a story to tell, it is the truest ever from his own lips; for if the facts be a trifle distorted, we get the results of their action, as he has felt it, even in his method of representing them. Of course, we knew something of the Greshams through Helen, but he told us more. He spoke of his mother, who was re-married to a country gentleman much younger than herself, and had almost cast off her children by her first husband; of his sister, the widow of Frederick Willis; there were only these two left out of five.

“My mother has Fairfield for her life, but it must eventually descend to me,” Captain Gresham said. “My father left us all dependent on her, and it is little either of justice or mercy that she has shown us. She gives me a hundred a year in aid of my pay, and to Kitty the same: poor Kitty, with nothing but her pension besides, and two boys to bring up! I daresay you wonder why I am not at Fairfield now—my mother has never asked me. Willis, that excellent fellow, and Kitty

met me at Portsmouth, and brought me to Bylands. Ah, what grief they were in for Fred! but they put it all aside to be of use to me. I should not be alive now but for their devoted kindness. Kitty is a jewel, poor dear, and I trust she will stay at Bylands with Fred's father as long as the old man lives."

He seemed to be very fond of his sister, and to be, indeed, of a warm-hearted nature. There was even an undertone of regret in his impeachment of his mother, who, as we knew from other quarters, had behaved worse than a step-mother to her children. James Gresham had not been a favourite at home, and Helen had only gone once to Fairfield since her return from India as a widow. Mrs. Carlyon (the former Mrs. Gresham was Mrs. Carlyon now) was haunted by a constant anxiety and terror lest any of her belongings should become an expense to her. I remember Helen being very angry once at a quite uncalled-for warning from her not to run into debt, because no help to get out of it would be given her from Fairfield. Captain Gresham existed under the

same menace, and no doubt he spoke with feeling sincerity when he said that my sister Helen was fortunate in not having any *encumbrances*—unlike his poor Kitty.

“Helen does not think so ; she envies Kitty her boys,” said I.

“There is no understanding the contradictions of women ! Some covet other people’s cares, some loathe their own,” was his hasty answer. “Mothers are commonly supposed to be proud of their sons who win them a bit of glory ; mine values me less than her least luxury. There is not one she would forego to advance my interests. I have experienced her refusals.”

“Never mind,” said Arthur ; “you have done gallantly thus far without requiring sacrifices. Money goes for very little in promoting true content. You would rather have your title to the Victoria Cross than receive a gift of ten thousand pounds.”

“I would not barter personal distinction for any of the good things that money can buy. I rate it as of a far nobler worth. Still, the *want* of

money is a positive evil, and may cause a man to lack what is far more desirable than money's self. How often, for instance, has a soldier to leave the girl he loves behind him, because he cannot afford to marry her? Either she is so high above him as to be out of his reach, or she is rich, and his honour would be impugned if he ventured to cast eyes of desire upon herself."

"Or she is poor, and they have not the courage of their fortunes between them," added I; though I felt tolerably sure that my illustration was not needed for the completion of the case that Captain Gresham was revolving.

"That is a much less frequent hindrance than you imagine; you would admit it if you had to follow the regiment. A girl is never too poor for a soldier if she takes his fancy, and they both have youth."

"Then I am convinced that there is an average of happy marriages amongst you. I believe in love-matches."

"So do I. Yes, the majority turn out well. The service limits our opportunities of extrava-

gance. As soon as a fellow comes into his money, he sells out, unless he be an enthusiast for the profession."

"You are heart and soul devoted to it?"

"Yes. I have fallen on stirring times of war. You are glorifying yourselves on the restoration of peace, but don't hope that it will last long. Forty years of it was enough. Charming as you make this pastoral life, I am not by any means ready yet to turn my sword into a pruning-hook."

"I hate war," said I; "it is one of the scourges of the earth. I am of that old opinion which would revive the duello, and let those who make the quarrels be the only ones to fight!"

"Wait till this little Jack of yours gets a pair of colours; then the Spartan mother will develop in you."

"My precious little Jack! Nay, but he is not to be a soldier."

"Then he must go to sea and grow a wooden leg. And you will be so proud of it that when he brings it home you will drop down on your knees and kiss his timber toes."

I kissed his bonny round rosy cheeks which were within reach just then, and declined any further jesting talk on so serious a subject. Arthur laughed at the tears in my eyes, and declared I was a goose.

On Wednesday afternoon Felicia stopped at the Rectory gate on Stella. She was going to ride to the Dower House to visit her grandmamma. Captain Gresham espied her the first, and went out; and when I joined them they were talking together, Felicia with a lovely blush, and a shy self-consciousness that I had never seen in her before, and Captain Gresham with a victorious air that became him well. I was glad to interrupt the colloquy; it had a dangerous look for Helen's peace.

While we were still at the gate up rode Mr. Tom Bethell with Blanche who dismounted to come in. Their visit was to our guest. Then Felicia cantered off, Captain Gresham lingering the last to see her go, while her last good-bye and last glance were given to him. Perhaps they

thought no one observed them, but Mr. Tom Bethell said to me as we sauntered side by side up the gravel walk: "All the girls are in love with Gresham's sentimental phiz."

"It will do them no harm if he does not make love to them," was my answer.

I know our proneness to adoration of the heroic, how susceptible we are in extreme youth—and also how easily diverted. Blanche blushed. Though she was one of those spirited girls who acknowledge only a limited liability to the weaknesses of their sex, she shared the general admiration felt for Captain Gresham by her more impressionable friends. I was pleased that she did: there is safety in numbers; and with all the girls in love with him, he might find a difficulty in choosing—if his choice were not fixed already. We really knew nothing of the young man's private history; but in the country matrimonial speculations form a staple for talk, and in certain gossipy quarters it had been said that he would not be a bad match for any girl in our neighbourhood—*except* Felicia Barrington.

But what if he set his heart on the exception ! No one had dared yet to think of such a catastrophe out of the family. I knew that Helen was brooding over it, and I believe a suspicion was sown that day in Tom Bethell's mind, and also in Miss Reed's. For Tom Bethell asked me pointedly how long our convalescent was going to stay at the Rectory, and if he was much at the Manor with his sister-in-law. And Miss Reed, with sly innuendo, remarked, on the last occasion of our meeting before the departure for London, that the country was, perhaps, fuller of danger than the town, and propinquity was of all perils the most to be dreaded for young people whose friendship was undesirable.

" Felicia, dear little innocent, talks of only one person ; out of the abundance of the heart the guileless mouth speaketh, and her grandmamma and I agree that she has seen and heard enough of that person for the present. Perhaps it was unavoidable under the circumstances, but it will be good for her to have distractions."

I repeated this pregnant speech to Helen.

"Yes," said she, "it is so. Felicia reads everything about the war that she can lay her hands on, and when Paul's regiment goes into action, she tells me all about it a dozen times over. When we return to Stoneleigh, she says she shall make friends with poor Katherine Willis. She even likes to hear about James, and asks endless questions about Paul as a boy. I cannot tell you what a relief it will be to my mind to get away with her to town, where a thousand new impressions may combine to efface this one."

"Candidly, Helen," said I appealing to her; "do you think Captain Gresham, if he aspired to Felicia, would meet with positive opposition from her family? For my part, I should maintain that his honours are the best sort of counter-weight to her heiress-ship."

"I would rather not discuss the chances of it, Clare. I like Paul, he is a fine character in many respects; but I doubt very much whether it would be for the happiness of either that they should become ardently attached."

"We are prodigiously taken with him at the

Rectory. Arthur calls him so manly and sincere. A young fellow cannot help looking rather silly with a lot of girls at his feet, but there is none of that fatuity in his manner when he is with us alone. And the bairnies are fond of him—always a good sign.”

“That is a doting mother’s notion! But seriously, dear Clare, don’t breathe a word of what has passed between us to anybody but Arthur. Miss Reed is full of hints, but I shall not let her be confidential. And to-morrow I trust we shall be on the road to safety. It is not likely that Paul will follow us to London, and if he do, London society is such a labyrinth that they may never meet. And besides, Mr. Barrington will be there to keep watch for his daughter.”

Felicia deferred her leave-taking of me until the last morning, and until she could have me for a few last moments alone. The shrewd little witch had divined my approval of Captain Gresham. She even asked in a whisper if he was not like Prince Charming.

“Nonsense!” said I. “You will lose yourself

in a wilderness of Prince Charmings when you go to court, if you are so easily fascinated."

She shook her head, laughing, yet half pensively. "I shall tell *you*," she added.

"When there is anything to tell," rejoined I.

Felicia was of a delicate, but not of a reserved nature. She had elected me the recipient of her confidences since she lost her mother. The dear child remembered that it was to me she had been committed. Helen's very position created a certain distance between them; but with me she was at ease. I felt peculiarly glad of it at this time. It was good that she should have a friend to resort to, free from strangeness: not too old for generous sympathy, nor too young for sound counsel. Most girls choose their bosom-ally amongst their companions of the same age, but Felicia found no need to do this; for when she wanted one, there was I, ready to her hand, tried, proved and loved through many years. Janet and Carr were, as ever, her devoted servants, but Felicia was their sweetly imperious mistress, above all familiarity. It was known at

the Dower House and to Mr. Barrington that I was her special friend in whom she trusted; and up to the present time, neither jealousy nor disapprobation had appeared. It was my aim to avoid arousing any feeling on the matter, and to keep myself in the background, that our cordial alliance might not challenge curious remark. I know that it has been made a mystery of since why we were so intimate, but I think it needs no explanation beyond what I have given.

The London house of the Bethells had been let for several years, but the lease had been calculated to expire with Felicia's child-life, and we heard a great deal of its re-decorating and re-furnishing for her occupation. Henceforward she was to pass the spring in town, and though the dowager protested a little against resuming the toils of a *chaperone*, it seemed to me that she prepared for them with quite sufficient alacrity.

The household moved up to London some days beforehand, and on Monday, the twenty-eighth of

April, Mrs. Gresham, Janet and Carr followed in personal attendance on the young lady of the Manor. Mrs. Bethell and her factotum travelled by the same train. The establishment was a careful selection from the best of the servants at Stoneleigh and also at the Dower House. There was a new park carriage, new horses of great price and beauty, and a new coachman bred to the town. On these fine possessions, the pride of high life, I cannot expatiate so eloquently as, perhaps, they deserve; but I recollect that Mr. Tom Bethell said his niece had gone to town with a very splendid retinue, but not beyond her fortunes; for she was the richest heiress whose introduction was announced for that season, and already people were talking of who would be a match for the beautiful Miss Barrington.

CHAPTER VII.

FELICIA'S FIRST SEASON.

FOR the events of Felicia's first season in town, I shall betake myself to her letters. She was a capital gossip for a friend in the country—a letter-writer who deserved to have lived before the days of the penny-post. She gave me many a glimpse of the world that I should else have lived and died unwotting of, and because she knew that she could tell me nothing of herself but what would interest me, she let her pen run into full details, and was grave, gay, sad, serious, sarcastic, merry, just as the spirit moved her at the moment. Extracts will sometimes suffice, sometimes I must give the whole of a letter; but for the continuity of the story, I shall omit

beginnings and endings, and refrain from parentheses : if any matter seem to need explanation, it will recur, and be explained further on.

“Imagine, Cousin Clare, that I have been only four hours in London, and already I have leisure that I do not know what to do with. So I will spend it on you. Papa was here, awaiting our arrival, and Uncle Ralph presented himself at dinner. Who would ever suppose that papa and he are brothers ? papa so exquisitely pleasant, Uncle Ralph so cynical and cross. He ridicules everything that people of taste and feeling admire : he is ill-natured even to me.

“ ‘Well, Miss Felicy, how long will it be before your country-roses are fallen ?’ was his first address. ‘You are going to make your curtsy to the Queen, and to marry a lord, at the least. Enter the beautiful Miss Barrington with a flourish of trumpets ! Exit the same to a muffled peal.’ Was it not unkind ?”

“Oh, for a breath of the morning on the Lang-

hill after the exciting, transitory honour and joy of going to Court! My presentation is over, and I am free of society. I did not entangle my feet in my train, or turn nervous, or faint, or forget the measured grace of my Court-curtsey, or blush more than was becoming—this is grandmamma's flattering report. Mine is that there was a polite crush, very perilous to my water-lilies and clouds of tulle, that I longed for the critical three minutes to be accomplished, that I passed out of the crowd into a circle of royalties, all in a shimmer of jewels and gold and costly apparel, that a dignified, stout little lady in blue gave me a white hand to kiss, that I looked up with a tremor and she looked down with a smile, and so I fell right loyally in love with our Gracious Sovereign Lady the Queen. * * * * And then it was over; and we were waiting for our carriage to take us away. Papa would have me dine in my fine clothes, and go with him to the opera afterwards — he pretends to be proud of his daughter; which is no more than a fair return for my admiration of him. Except Prince

Charming, I know no one so captivating. How is the Prince, Cousin Clare? You may tell him my news, if you please."

"I have sent you the *Morning Post* in which you may read an account of two balls, a concert and a breakfast at which grannie, papa and I were amongst the distinguished guests. I am getting into the full swing of it, Cousin Clare. My youth, health and spirits bear me on, and I scarcely feel the earth under me or the hours as they fly. But this is Sunday and we are resting. Mrs. Gresham and I have been to church—the only two of the household able or willing to make the time. What a rush life is here! Yet with what zest grannie enters into it! Her contemporaries who have never been out of the whirl are rallying round her: some of them old ladies, fearfully and wonderfully made up! I must tell you of one who was a famous beauty, and a toast in her day—Lady Wimborne-Ellis. And she might be lovely still if she would consent to be herself: if one might pluck off her wig, wash her clean of

paint and powder, and decently cover her up in soft silk and laces. She has vivacious blue eyes, and the pretty winning expression that must have been her chief fascination is discernible still amongst her wrinkles and fictitious adornments. She leans to the airy frivolous style in dress, and wears a wilderness of mock roses amongst the frills and flounces of her white tarlatan. If she were to appear at Stoneleigh as she appears in a fashionable London drawing-room, the people would treat her as an escaped madwoman. She has a son of, at least, forty, and he does not seem ashamed of his mother. If she were mine, how I should pray that vanity would spare her a little while before she goes hence, and is no more seen!"

"Do you love fine upholstery, Cousin Clare? Not you, indeed, you love dimity and well scrubbed boards. Then I must spare you the bill of my sumptuous furniture, my triple-pile carpets, satin curtains and cabinet-work glittering with French polish and or-molu; of my sanctum

and my bed—the last an ethereal structure of lace draperies and blue silk, in which, however, I do not sleep so soundly as in my little white bed at home, that the sun shines upon. But Janet and Carr are pleased: they call it no more than is becoming for their young lady; so I try to resign my mind to gaudy state, fancy myself a queen, and dream ‘how uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.’ The hum of the world getting-up and going about its work begins before cock-crowing, and there is no more silence, let us be ever so weary. The hum rises, spreads, swells louder, fuller, nearer, until it becomes the many-voiced roar of London in the fashionable season. You have never lived in London—don’t wish to live here. Stoneleigh is far, far happier. I shall never really care for this fuss and finery as some do. It was a refreshment yesterday to meet George Sylvester with his red country face, and to hear him talk quite unaffectedly of how he is bored in London. ‘You need not stay, you are not going to be presented,’ says grannie, as sharp as a needle. ‘No,’ says George, ‘I am not

going to be presented, but ' (with a rueful look at me) ' I am under bonds for six weeks to my Aunt Clarissa.'

" Grannie laughed at him for his submissiveness. Poor George, as the youngest son at Bylands, is sent to dance attendance on this aunt, who is his godmother besides, and very rich. I have seen her once—Mrs. Clarissa Constable, an eccentric old lady who goes about doing good in very shabby clothes. George does not like it. I wanted him to ride with papa and me in the Park this morning early, but he was pledged to visit a Ragged School that she has established in the mews at the back of her house; and to-night, instead of dining with us and going to the opera afterwards, he has to stop at home, and hand cups of tea to the devout ladies who attend her monthly Jerusalem parties. Does a 'Jerusalem Party' explain itself? It is a drawing-room tea and tattle with netting, knotting and crochet for the conversion of the Jews—one of the many forms of pious dissipation which prevail in the gay season amongst the unco' good, who com-

pound for their own busy idlenesses by condemning the operas, balls and plays that we delight in. George wants me to know her better, and is sure I shall love her when I do; for she is a miracle of charity and benevolence, though one of the untidiest, fattest, most irregular old ladies in London."

"Such a day! such queer strange sights and sounds and histories! I was between laughing and crying all the morning, and even now, as I think of it, I am laughing with the tears in my eyes. We talk about our poor people at Stoneleigh, but we know nothing of the tragical grotesque pathos of real poverty. If I were to live to be a hundred, I never could forget what I have seen since I got up this morning. And it was all through George Sylvester. He persuaded me yesterday to pay a visit to his aunt, and she invited me to breakfast at eight o'clock, with a promise that she would show me things undreamt of in young-lady-hood philosophy. My curiosity at once consented. It is no effort to me to rise

betimes, and I kept my appointment with the strictest punctuality. I had better have taken half an hour's grace; for when I reached the house with Carr, one maid was scouring the steps, and another was pretending to elicit a sort of order out of the dusty chaos that serves their mistress for dining-parlour.

"I ought to preface my story by telling you that Mrs. Clarissa Constable regards the common comforts of life as non-essentials, beneath the care of an immortal soul; and her servants, regulating their labours by her theory, are remiss in providing even for its decencies, are slovenly, lazy and wasteful, as mere worldly folk would consider it quite wicked to let them be. The young woman who was 'settling' the parlour conducted me upstairs to a bedroom (the blinds had not been drawn up, nor the windows opened, since Queen Anne died), and when I went down again, after loitering ten minutes, I found half the oval table spread for breakfast, while the other half was left heaped with a month's accumulated neglects—a crushed black silk bonnet crowning the pile.

“A minute or two, and George appeared—from a walk round by the square to escort me, as I discovered, he not having reckoned on my being true to time; and then came Mrs. Clarissa—O, the frowsy old saint! I wish I could draw you her picture! She complimented me on my blooming cheeks: ‘There used to be plenty such roses in my day—there are very few worth plucking now,’ says she. ‘I have seen bushels of ’em, only waiting a buyer,’ says George:—he hates this cant on the degeneration of the modern youth, and so do I: especially from one who loved the world, and did not leave it, until it was leaving her—who, according to grannie, has only exchanged one form of worldliness for another. But I don’t like to believe that; Mrs. Clarissa seems genuinely self-denying and kind.

“A bell rang, one servant entered, and we knelt down for prayers, which Mrs. Clarissa delivered without book, improvising a rather pointed petition in favour of me—Well, perhaps I need it.—You cannot imagine, unless you lead this life, how little leisure there is for quiet collectedness and

thought. I must struggle against its encroachments, or my time will be all devoured to the very crumbs—and mamma's sweet counsels forgotten.

“After prayers followed the breakfast. Poor George, he ought to have his reward, for it must be a severe mortification of the flesh to spend six weeks with Mrs. Clarissa! To say that her table is plain is nothing. She ate a dish of porridge and a slice of brown bread herself, and for George and me there was the brown loaf, fresh butter and water-cresses, with tea—a wholesome and sufficient diet, I presume, for I felt light as a feather, and very good-humoured upon it. The old lady offered no apology; she is inured to this ascetic simplicity, and if I spent my days as hers are spent, I might acquire the same distaste for luxury. How could one walk about amongst the starving, oneself always full-fed?

“The meal was not long, and while Mrs. Clarissa read her letters afterwards, George was bidden to show me the curiosities and pictures in the drawing-room—all clouded with a grey gauze of dirt. And at last, towards eleven o'clock, we went

out—the old black bonnet, an older shawl and a still more old pair of black gloves completing Mrs. Clarissa's toilette. If ever we have a Great Revolution, and I am reduced to such straights as the dames and demoiselles of the *ancien régime*, I'll turn dresser to old ladies. There is so much beauty of old age thrown away, for want of taste and sense! Mrs. Clarissa has a serene soft face that would be lovely in a prim net cap and quakerish white chip bonnet; but not even a *chiffonnier* of Paris would pick up the clothes she wears, all composed of the cheapest materials, and put on long after they have ceased to owe her any service. The marvel is that she still looks the gentlewoman, which I attribute to her courtesy mingled with authority—pity she does not exercise the authority more at home! But no, all her energy is spent on the promotion of philanthropic schemes out-of-doors—schemes for rescuing children out of the gutter, and young girls out of worse mire, for setting the halt and lame on their feet, for opening the eyes of the blind, and the ears of the deaf. I am not making fun, Cousin Clare, it is

really so. To interest Mrs. Clarissa, you must be poor and in misery, sick or very wicked. She has a provoking air and tone in addressing me sometimes, as if my good fortune and my joy in my happy life were wrong—Thus: ‘Ah, my dear, it seems all well with you *now*, but what when the world and its pleasures fail you? Where will you seek for comfort?’ ‘I’ll come to you,’ said I, in the thoughtless gaiety of my heart? ‘Mind an old woman’s words, Felicia Barrington—God will not let any of us find comfort but in himself. Therefore, do not forget him now, and he will not forget you in the time of trouble.’ She spoke with such over-earnest solemnity that I was quite vexed and dismayed—George too. It did not feel like a word in season. I don’t see the moral and spiritual advantage of anticipating sorrows—quite sufficient to the day is the evil thereof. Many a little vexation befalls me that I never complain of—

“The ragged children were singing doggerel rhymes, clapping hands, and marching in time and step round and round the disused stable,

which has been converted into a school-refuge for them. We looked in at the open door, and waited until the exercise was over—the ludicrous precision of it is a great fact in discipline accomplished; I suppose the sparrows who have been there a month or two help in taming the newly-caught. This school is Mrs. Clarissa's peculiar hobby. She set it a-going, keeps it open at her own expense, and in the cold weather, when it is the fullest, she provides a warm meal each day for her starvelings. They come and go, she says, and often she loses sight of them altogether; but some remain, and acquire decent habits, and on a few, both boys and girls, she has kept a hold since they began life for themselves in the early independent way common to London sparrows. She told me the whole story of one—the newsboy who brings her daily paper. He was a ragamuffin with never a shoe to his foot, who came to her open windows one June evening when a Jerusalem party was assembled. An impudent urchin he was, and amused the ladies by turning wheels on the pavement—(*Punch*

had an illustration of this ingenious tumbling to earn a ha'penny in a recent number); but after their laughter came pity, and one of the congregation who was apt to speak her mind, remarked that they would be better employed tailoring for that little Christian waif than tatting for the Jews. And then she cried out, 'Where do you live, little boy?' 'Nowhere!' 'Are you hungry?' He grinned, and a lump of cake was tossed to him over the area-railings; he caught it cleverly, and turned a double summer-sault for thanks. The inquisitive lady pursued her investigations. 'Have you a father living?' He shook his head. 'A mother? Any brothers? any sisters?' Only negative shakes. 'He has not a bad face,' says another lady. 'He would be pretty if he were clean,' says a third. 'Would you like to go to school?' asked Mrs. Clarissa. To this his reply was a comical grimace, and he was off like a shot. They thought they had done with him, but one Sunday night when Mrs. Clarissa returned from church, there was he, holding on to the railings, and

trying to see into the room ; but it was dark and empty now, and there were no ladies to give him cake. He looked pinched and shivering, for the weather was beginning to be cold. Mrs. Clarissa ordered him food, and just said, pointing to the mews : ‘ Down there, in the old stable, I have a few lads who come to learn to read a bit, and to write and count, and to hear who made them, and cares for them more than they care for themselves—do you know who that is ? ’ The lad looked up to the sky, twinkling with millions of stars above the dusky roofs and chimney-pots, and nodded : ‘ He’s there.’ ‘ And here and everywhere,’ began Mrs. Clarissa, spreading her hands abroad as one about to preach. But the little scamp cut her short with a whistle expressive of the profoundest incredulity, and immediately fled round the corner. He was seen no more until November, when one bitter sleety morning the milkman found him asleep on the doorstep. It is winter that tames these wild birds ; the cold and hunger together subdue them. He was got to school then, and proved an

intelligent boy with really good dispositions: not parrot-pious like an infant in a tract, but bold enough to speak the truth, and not averse to soap and water. Spring arrived, and he grew restless again, and betook himself to vagabondage and the streets. Mrs. Clarissa has a rule,—she does not contend with Nature, but tries to employ the strong inclinations that will not be controlled, and she got him a water-cress walk. I should be afraid to say how many miles she told me he tramped between dawn and breakfast-time.—The next autumn he came back into the school, and the following season she started him as a news-boy. And a very sprightly, intelligent young rascal he is: too much of a weed, however, for the London garden; and she would like to transplant him to the Canadian backwoods, where his abounding physical vigour, pluck and audacity would be valuable, and in their right place.

“Where there are thirty or forty refuse children gathered together, we are sure to see some bad faces, and there were some in Mrs. Clarissa’s school. Yet their ugliness was, I think, in every

instance, the result of disease. There was one poor girl, Eliza, almost helplessly lame ; her knee had been injured when she was an infant, and left to get better or worse as nature might please : the consequence is a life-long deformity and anguish. She looks sour and sulky upon it, and cannot be made to keep herself clean. She was the most hopeless specimen of all ; and yet her great eyes had a gloomy sort of beauty, and she is kind to her little brothers whom she brings to the school with her. She has a half-witted father, and a mother who goes out charing and makes herself comfortable, leaving the family to the charge of this lame eldest girl, whose age may be about thirteen. There is one sketch for you.

“ Here is another—Bridget. Bridget is Irish—a rather pretty little creature, in the wild Irish style : that is, with a flat face, scarlet lips, bold blue eyes, and a shock of unkempt black hair. She was in a mild mood when I saw her, but Mrs. Clarissa tells me she is subject to fits of temper so violent, obstinate, and malicious, that she might be possessed by a devil. Perhaps she is. At other

times she is a favourite, for her rollicking humour and wit. And she never throws things, strikes, or calls bad names even at her worst. They expect to make something valuable out of Bridget, because she is laborious and honest, and capable of attachment.

“And now I think you must have had enough of the Ragged School.

“We went next to visit a poor pensioner, Mary, a young woman whom Mrs. Clarissa has been feeding, clothing, and patronising for these four years past. Let me try to describe her. She was sitting up in bed, supported by a moveable, cushioned frame, and everything about her was white, and redolent of a faint, cleanly poverty—all prepared for a reception. The coverlet was strewn with shreds and patches of bright-coloured kid, silk, and ribbon, which she was fashioning into dolls' shoes of various sizes. Such slender white delicate hands she had, and a face as fair; but she pretends to be totally blind—and I don't believe she is: she looks to me the picture of cunning and craft. She went through a descrip-

tive catalogue of her ills for my edification—I will not recite them for yours, however, for I am sure they are simulated. I asked if a doctor had seen her. She said she had a horror of doctors—doctors had brought her to the pass she was in, and she groaned. While we were there a fat obsequious woman who “does for” the dolls’ shoe-maker came in from the next room, and canted awfully—a league of impostors, Cousin Clare, my word for it! George had stayed in the court below while we went upstairs, and when we rejoined him, he asked significantly what my opinion was of Mary. I told him with perfect frankness: he was of the same way of thinking.

“ ‘But Aunt Clarissa is ready to stake her faith on the sly little rogue’s honesty,’ said he, laughing at her. Mrs. Clarissa coloured, her eyelids quivered, and she seemed sadly put out, but she answered him candidly, ‘I begin to fear that Mary is what you call her—a sly little rogue—and her chief disease, moral obliquity. But the question arises: Shall I turn her adrift because she is worse than I imagined? To be maimed of her body was bad

enough, but to be so deceitful of heart and crooked in all her ways, is far more deadly for her poor soul. She has grown very bold in her wicked pretences.' 'She will lie and cheat and feign as long as she has breath,' said George. 'I have not patience to see you so taken in.' 'Human patience is very short, George. We have not forgiven Mary seven times yet. But it will be my painful duty to tell her that I have found her out.' Justice was satisfied with that prospect, and we two severe young moralists held our peace. Poor Mrs. Clarissa was very unhappy, and led the way home. I could almost have wished that she had kept her charitable delusion."

"You ask me the end of the story of Mary—perhaps we shall never know the end. Here is a brief continuation:—Mrs. Clarissa did not linger over her painful task, reluctant as she was to have her suspicions confirmed. George was my informant. He told me that his aunt allowed the usual number of days to elapse between her visits, and then went again at the hour she always goes,

but accompanied by Dr. Tuke. Mary received them with her pious complacency, and as her rôle is before a stranger, enumerated her afflictions. Mrs. Clarissa approached the subject she had come upon very tremulously: 'Do you know, Mary dear, it has sometimes struck me lately that you have a glimmering of sight which you used not to have when first I knew you.' 'Surely the Lord is going to be gracious to me after all these years that I have prayed him to open my eyes!' cried Mary, clasping her hands with joyful enthusiasm. 'She is no more blind than I am,' muttered Dr. Tuke. Mary seemed not to hear him. 'I've had a sort of lightening and flashing at odd times,' she went on in her hysteric ejaculatory tone, 'and I've said to myself, if the holy God should be willing to show forth his power on *me*—a poor miserable sinner—and give sight to her that was born blind, what a miracle that would be!' Mrs. Clarissa was shedding tears. 'I should like this gentleman, he is very kind and clever, to examine your spine, Mary,' said she. 'And perhaps we shall find a miracle

working there also,' added the shrewd old medico. But Mary assumed a solemn mien, and declined the examination. 'No,' said she, 'I've made a vow that never a one more of them doctors shall have his hands on me! If the Lord raises me up, well and good, let Him do what pleases Him best; if not, may He give me grace and strength to bear my cross patiently to the blessed end!' 'What if I say you are able at this moment to skip as nimbly out of your bed as any woman alive? And that without succour from either above or below,' said the doctor. 'Sir, if you come to insult a poor creature, you may go.'

"They went, but you will not be surprised to hear that Mrs. Clarissa has refused to give her interesting *protégée* up. She is in half-a-dozen minds a day about her—whether she is a thorough-paced cheat, or a monument of divine mercy in a series of miraculous cures, or a hysterical subject with vast simulative powers, or a cripple, helpless and destitute, such as she persists in appearing. Dr. Tuke admits that she is hysterical, but not

blind or paralytic as she pretends, and he says she must have connivers at her imposture to sustain it as she does. Mrs. Clarissa is at present bent on bringing her to a conviction of her guilt in imposing on the charitable. George does not think she will see it until it ceases to pay."

"I have told you nothing yet, you say, of my triumphs and conquests. Bless your innocence, I have none to tell! I am one of those gentry whom King James advised to stop at home on their estates, where they were like big ships in a river, instead of coming to London where they were mere cock-boats on the great sea. I am one little girl amongst ten thousand—one little girl more precious than all the rest to one person—and that's papa. I have no train of suitors—how should I have? George is extremely useful, and I always like him. But I am not in love with anybody in particular—not yet. I know how curious you are to hear whether Prince Charming has paid his respects to us in town—and not to keep you in suspense—he has—and papa was

pleasant—papa likes him. Prince Charming dines with us to-night.”

“The Queen’s Birthday Drawing-room.—Yes, papa and I went, and I send you the *Post* with all about it. It was a Collar-Day for the Knights, and everybody was *en grande tenue*. The *Post* describes for you some of the dresses, but not mine—an oversight, of course. It was lovely, and I wore mamma’s opals and diamonds; white silk puffed over with frosted tulle, petticoat and train alike, and trimmed with bunches of forget-me-not. My wreath was of the same bonny wee blue flowers, and my long veil hanging down behind of plain tulle. Papa and George and *somebody else* exclaimed in delight at the airy, fairy, elegant simplicity of my apparel, but grannie pouted a discontented lip:—in fact, she knew what it had cost, and that Janet and Carr made it! I had been spending so much money in another fashion that if I had gone to a court-milliner, and had ordered the dress grannie wished me to have, I must have run into debt for it, and

that I never mean to do. I enjoyed the gala, and Prince Charming came to see me dressed before I went—he was the *somebody else*. Pray don't purse up your pretty mouth so dubiously, Cousin Clare. He asked simply—Might he come? And another somebody answered as simply, He might if he thought it worth while.

“There was a prodigious crowd in the streets, for the Queen's Drawing-room was only one item of amusement in the Celebration of Peace. But night was the grand display! We had a tiresome debate, prorogued and resumed at every available moment from the hour of our meeting at breakfast until past nine o'clock, when it was carried by a majority of *one*, that I might be taken out to see a little bit of the illuminations and fire-works. (For accounts thereof read the papers.) Grannie predicted that we should all come back crushed to death, but we happily escaped so melancholy a catastrophe. Uncle Tom took charge of Rose, Mr. Courteney of Blanche, and George Sylvester of me. Papa would have escorted Mrs. Gresham, but she would not go. Prince Charming stayed

at home in obedience to the popular vote. He had come up from Hampton Court in the morning and we kept him: we did not let him leave us till to-day.

“By dint of much coaxing, papa has been prevailed on to consent to a Peace Celebration at Stoneleigh. It is to take place immediately on our return, and Prince Charming has promised that he will come and play hero. Shall we not be proud—a V. C. man——O, Cousin Clare, I am so happy! But what a sigh that was! it almost blew away my letter—it would have blown it quite away, but for the weight of matter in its pages.”

“What am I so happy about? About everything! I am happy to be alive and gay—and beautiful in some folks’ fond eyes—have you forgotten when it was a blessed thing only to see the sun, and feel the air, and hear the birds sing?

“Uncle Ralph observed this morning, when he met me riding in the Park with papa, that my

roses were more permanent than he expected, but had I caught my young lord yet? Papa looked glum, and rode on—he does not like this sort of jesting. ‘I don’t want to lose my little Felicy,’ he says continually, and I am sure he will thank neither lord nor commoner who may come to fetch me away! And I am equally sure that I shall never part from him until somebody else makes me love him better than I love papa—and I hardly know how that can be!

“You have heard of ‘two aspirants to my favour.’ Have you, indeed! They were hardly worth mentioning: the first had the *name* of a lord—papa abolished *him* at a word. The second sent his mother to speak for him—*modest*, but I would rather on the whole my lover spoke for himself.

“Rose and Blanche are having their hearts’ content of balls—four this week. Rose is wonderfully pretty, and Blanche is distinguished, but so abrupt and odd that people are afraid of her. Uncle Tom was remarkably civil while he stayed (was it *he* brought you rumours?) but it is

pleasanter with the girls alone. They have not much amusement at Ringwood ; I am so glad that you suggested I should invite them to town. It keeps poor Reed in good humour too ; for she chaperones them about, and they all enjoy it. They would like to be presented, but grannie says decidedly, No. They ought to have been presented at their first coming-out ; but as they were not, they must wait now until they are married. Blanche need not wait long if she can agree with Mr. Courteney. Uncle Tom has given his consent, but she coquettes and says, she sees no fun in getting married—she would rather be a girl, and dance and play a few years longer. Perhaps Mr. Courteney will be so obliging as to wait her pleasure.”

“You would be delighted with the new pictures—it is a very good exhibition. Times of great national excitement and trial must be favourable to genius. The war has suggested two or three admirable pictures. A ‘Ball in the Camp’ charms the majority, but my heart is divided

between 'The Child of the Regiment,' a little darling lying asleep on a tomb-stone in a cemetery, beyond which is the smoke of the battle; and a tired soldier 'Home' from the war, and just welcomed by his family. It made me think of Jane Burt's son—the meeting there would have been much like this if he had survived to come back. Don't forget to tell me how his poor young widow is—and the baby, how does it fare? I need not remind you that they must wait for nothing we can give them—but, alas, how little that is! I believe they will get his medals when the distribution takes place; you might tell them so—perhaps it will help to console his mother, for she was very proud of him.

"I could not look at any more pictures that day, but I have been twice since. Mrs. Gresham and I like to go best in the cool of the morning, after breakfast, and to come away before the rooms fill. The weather is very sultry now, and I shall not be sorry to go out of town for a few days to Grandmamma Barrington at Hampton Court. But about the pictures. A splendid New-

foundland, rescuing a child from drowning, would throw your dog-loving husband into a fit of enthusiasm—'Saved' it is called; and you would be as ready to cry over the forlorn ragged robin in 'Home and the Homeless,' as he would be to cheer that honourable member of the Humane Society. 'The Prayer of Faith,' a Spanish scene, is beautiful, the doleful 'Death of Chatterton' exquisitely painted, but the most pathetic picture of all to my mind, is 'The Scapegoat,' driven out into the wilderness—but I will not attempt to describe it—I wish you could see the sunset of it on the hills of Judea! Some people advance, give it a perplexed stare, and turn aside with a contemptuous smirk. 'The Abandoned,' a wreck at sea, by Stansfield, is very grand, but the picture I should most dearly like to possess is Linnell's 'Harvest Sunset.' And O, my poor dear Clare with the toothache, 'Toothache in the Middle Ages,' if we believe Mr. Marks, must have been just the same ludicrous acute martyrdom which we are all able to bear so philosophically for our friends."

“ All the world was in the Park yesterday to see the Queen and welcome home the Guards. Poor fellows, it made my heart ache to watch them tramp by, so worn, so weary, some with their banners riven to tatters — honourable tatters ! The people gave them an enthusiastic reception, and some had energy and good-will to be glad, but I noticed many ranks that never raised head or eye from the dusty hot road. We heard that they were aggrieved because the Germans had been preferred to the honour of attending upon the Queen at Aldershott. If the Germans were preferred it was an unkind blunder. Our soldiers deserve well of their country, the very best Queen and people can do for them ; and these honours and rewards that seem so trivial to philosophers are, in fact, most precious where substantial recompence is impossible. What jewel would shine like the Cross of Valour on the breast of Prince Charming and his peers ? We must be in London, dear Mrs. Gresham and I, to see our hero decorated.

“ To-morrow we go to Hampton Court : the limes are in blossom, and it will be delicious.

We take only Janet—Grandmother Barrington has not room for more of us. Perhaps papa will run down while I am there, but it is only a *perhaps*—he has so many engagements. None, however, he has solemnly promised me, that shall interfere with his being at Stoneleigh for our fête in celebration of Peace. I know he will be sadly impatient to be off to the German waters when the season is over, so we must be quick about it. Prince Charming is to travel from town with him, and to have his quarters at the Manor House. I shall have a thousand and one tales to tell you when we meet which I have not had time to write——”

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN THE LIMES WERE IN BLOSSOM.

FELICIA's frequent and lively references to her Prince Charming prepared me to expect a grave communication when I saw her. But Helen had said nothing, nor had any suggestion reached me from Ringwood. Perhaps the matter looked serious, and all concerned were afraid of precipitating difficulties by indulging in idle or premature words. Mrs. Bethell and Miss Reed came back to the Dower House; I paid them my compliments on their return, and heard many pretty things of Felicia, but not a hint of what I expected. The same discreet silence was observed at Ringwood, where Mr. Tom Bethell had at last established himself and family for a

permanency. Rose and Blanche came home when Felicia went to Hampton Court, but never an allusion made they to Prince Charming. The avoidance of his name increased my anxiety, my curiosity; but I reflected that in a week or ten days, if I could wait so long, both might be appeased.

Meanwhile, I knew that Felicia was happy, for she wrote to me every day. She had a gift with her pen in familiar writing, and it seemed a necessity to her to employ it. The history of her visit to Hampton Court when the limes were in blossom, I shall again leave to her own telling.

“Here we are, Cousin Clare, safe out of the reek and the tumult, with Grandmamma Barrington, in that grand old royal lodging, like a jar of *pot-pourri*, where the book-closet is, and the old novels written in letters and bound in white and gold that you have heard me talk about. It smells sweet and spicy, musty and fusty as it always did, and as I sit at this spider-legged rickety table, the biggest of a nest of spider-

legged rickety tables, each one more spider-like and rickety than another, I fall into my childish trick of 'fancying,' and am not myself at all, but a heroine of one of the last century romances, inditing my adventures and my confidences to the dear friend and sister of my soul. To keep up the illusion, you should preserve my letters in a casket of sandal-wood, where your posterity may discover them a hundred years hence, and in the midst of their modern dissipations, may wonder at the history of a rich young lady of fashion of this present age, much as I wonder at the history of the elegant Miss Byron and her contemporaries. Grandmamma protests that the old novels are infinitely more amusing than any she meets with now-a-days, but I don't think so, for I have dipped into one or two, and there is nobody amusing except Lovelace, the wicked hero, of whom, says Mrs. Gresham, the less I know the better. She prescribes me 'Emma' in lieu of 'Clarissa;' but Emma and her friends are prosy, selfish and dull, exactly like the people we see and hear every day, and I want to be taken

amongst noble strangers in a story-book—so I am just gone to Castlewood with Henry Esmond. If you have not yet made his delightful acquaintance, pray let me introduce him.

“One may read and write here all day, it is so quiet. Scarcely anybody comes to call, and grandmamma has no carriage to drive about. What a lovely old lady she is, and how fond of papa, and of me for his sake! She has given me a little pearl necklace and brooch with a pendant and ear-drops—the pink velvet lining of the case is faded quite yellow. ‘My darling, they are the last of my treasures, and I have kept them for thee,’ she said, and her sweet old eyes were twinkling full of tears. Yes, she loves us, but I question whether she does not love better her game of cards—like the last century ladies again who ruined themselves at play.

“Has not somebody written an essay on the influence of the dwelling? I move with an air more stately and a step more measured about this palace of refuge for poor nobility. I feel that there is a very shady side to high life, but its decay

is still in honour here. Some of my own people are on this shady side, and must go softly there to their days' end. Grandmamma has had many sorrows, many hard trials and losses, but her clouded evening is not altogether melancholy. She talks to me by the long hour of her troubles, always finishing with one assurance: 'However, my darling, we have nothing to blush for, no disgrace to make us hide our heads. I could have gone to Court with thee amongst the proudest, if thy Grandmother Bethell had not claimed the better right.' And she is calm and-happy enough, except on the days when Uncle Ralph comes down.

"I cannot love Uncle Ralph—he must be the original person who threw his slipper at the night-ingales to make them leave off singing. He threw his slipper (metaphorically) at me yesterday, when I was carolling an air by the open window—you know how I carol without ever thinking. Grandmamma pleaded for me: 'Have patience with the poor child—she has a most sweet voice.' 'She need not let everybody hear it,' snarled my

gracious kinsman—And there, behold, was Prince Charming coming up the terrace—he had heard it—Uncle Ralph had seen *him*. ‘You are all of one sort, you women, you *sirens*,’ he went on; ‘here is our pretty painted innocence, practising her new version of an old song—do you know it, Miss Felicy? “Whistle, and I’ll come to thee, my lad”—Now she has put on her modesty’—Blushing he calls *paint*,—I know I blushed and looked quite vexed and shame-faced as Prince Charming was ushered in——”

“I am going to report you a conversation.—‘Uncle Ralph, why are you so bitter against women?’ ‘That is a shrewish inquiry, Miss Felicy—am I *so* bitter?’ ‘Yes—you say the most ill-natured things that ever I heard.’ ‘Then you don’t keep your ears open to the voices of your own sex.’ ‘*Oh!* do *we* speak against one another?’ ‘*Don’t* you?’ Uncle Ralph walked off with that significant retort-question, and I fell a-thinking — not to much purpose, however. Presently he walked back. ‘Well, Miss Felicy,

have you re-considered your case?' 'No—I am sure the women I know speak well of women.' 'The women *you* know! Who wrote that famous portrait of *The Modern Miss* which I caught you studying with a face of flame?' 'Some man whom a woman has cruelly ill-used.' 'Reverse your nouns; say: some woman whom a man has cruelly ill-used.' 'The more shame for her then! but are you *sure*?' 'Quite sure—it is the finest feather in her cap.' 'What is she like?' 'Like nobody but herself—not like the women *you* know.' 'What would make her do it?' 'A bad passion for notoriety, I suppose—and money.' 'Where can she have got her ideas from?' 'She must have evolved them out of her own moral consciousness: she is herself a modern miss.' 'Not young!' 'She tries to seem so—' 'Horrid old thing! I always thought those portraits of women were written by some very unpleasant man in imitation of La Bruyère, and in my own mind I called him Mephistopheles in the pulpit.' 'And you *read* them? Ah, Felicity, and so they *pay*. If Mephistopheles was advertised to give a course

of Lent Lectures you would all flock to hear him. Mephistopheles preaching morality would draw more ladies of fashion than another St. Paul.' 'Who is insinuating evil of women *now*?' 'My dear little girl, don't try to talk of what you don't understand. You have *too* much curiosity: so had your mother Eve, and you remember what came of it. If you must have fruit of the tree of knowledge, get Mrs. Gresham to pluck it for you, and see that it is not tainted. But if you will be advised by an old cynic, you will wait till it is ripe, and drops into your lap.'

"That was all I got by my attack on Uncle Ralph, and I am still as much as ever in the dark as to why he hates women. For he does hate us—and he despises us too."

"Next autumn I mean to plant an avenue of lime-trees along the raised pathway that goes down to the river from Burn-Bridge. I am in love with the lime-trees here: the scent of them and the humming of bees in the crowded blossoms is like Paradise. Grandmamma Barrington is so good

to me, so indulgent—there is no one equal to her but papa. ‘If I had the casting of thy fortune, my treasure, it should be a very happy one,’ she said to me last night, and then she asked what fortune I should choose. I could not answer her. If you were a girl again, what fortune would you choose, Cousin Clare? To be married for love—to be Arthur’s wife? But what silly nonsense I am writing! Grandmamma kissed me, and said she could guess. Oh, she *is* so kind!

“It was a very hot day, too hot to ride or walk, but in the evening we went out on the river. The twilight was still flushed and rosy when the moon began to rise. I wish I could describe to you the beauty of it! I love river scenery—the long reeds and grasses, and the old trees on the banks, dipping their branches in the cool dark water. I have painted several vignettes for my big journal here—you shall see them when I come home. As it gloomed towards night, they made me sing: Prince Charming has a voice too, and presently we sang all together; we were five in the boat, for Uncle Ralph was with us. Papa says I am

taming the savage beast in Uncle Ralph, and indeed, I think he is a shade more civil to me since I rebuked him for his bearishness towards women. He has actually given me his word that he will come to Stoneleigh ! But lest you should expect a deeper reformation than is the case, and be disappointed, let me quote you a pretty speech he made me this morning—perhaps the prettiest he has made me yet : ‘ Yes, Miss Felicy, I have taken your measure ; you are not so wise or good as you fancy, but neither are you such a selfish empty fool as most of your sex. But you may turn out a heartless jade yet ! I advise no man to trust you—the very best of you are often the worst for coining virtuous reasons to excuse their faithlessness.’

“ Can you imagine me untrue to any one I love ? I would tear my heart out of my bosom if I believed that it could ever play me false ! ”

“ What is Prince Charming doing at Hampton Court ? How should I tell ? Ask him yourself, Cousin Clare, if you wish to know. Perhaps he is

here for his health, perhaps for his business, perhaps for his pleasure : is it for me to inquire of Prince Charmings what they do here, there, anywhere ? Sometimes he rides—and he has ridden through Bushy amongst the chestnuts with me ; sometimes he walks—and I have met him twice or thrice under the lime-trees towards sunset, when grandmamma goes out with her silver stick and me to breathe the air ; sometimes he dines—for I have a recollection of him at our round table, carving the pullet that else I must have carved ; sometimes (too often) he smokes a cigar, for I have scented him coming along the terrace when the breeze was favourable, before he was in sight ; sometimes he talks—anon he is silent ; sometimes he is contented to sit still ; sometimes he has a restless fit, and is for going to London next day. But he has not gone yet—perhaps he will go on Thursday. And towards seven o'clock, when the sun is red on the tops of the Great Bethell Oaks, if you are looking out from the Langhill, you may see me come whirling along the high-road to the Manor.—Shall I not be glad ? ”

And was not I glad too ! I had a wave of the hand, and a shower of smiles and nods from the carriage-window as it passed the Rectory gate, and later in the evening, when the bairns were in bed, and Arthur had gone to his study for an hour, I ran across to the Manor to kiss my sister and dear Felicia, and to hear what news.

CHAPTER IX.

IDLE HOURS.

EVERY day at this time seemed to increase the lustre of Felicia's beauty. When she came into a room she brightened it with her fair presence. I think it must have been the happiness that radiated from her, the infectious gaiety and light-heartedness of youth. I expected a little air of shyness with me after her letters, but there was nothing of the kind. She took my face between her hands, kissed me on either cheek, and challenged me to say whether London and late hours had made hers less blooming.

She was full of chat. I could not have edged in an inquiry if I had been ever so desirous, and her lively disengaged manner almost convinced

me that my anticipations had out-run the truth. She brought me her big journal with the new vignettes from Hampton Court to inspect, and gave me several rapid sketches of her sentiments on things in general that had happened since she went away, and at last fell on the theme of the Peace Festival that was to be at Stoneleigh.

"The manor will be crowded to the roof: papa is to bring lots of gentlemen, Uncle Ralph *may* come, and Captain Gresham and his friend Major Trefusis are sure."

"No ladies?" said I.

"There are plenty of ladies in the neighbourhood—George Sylvester's sisters, the Claylands girls, my cousins from Ringwood, and any number from Gladestone. What I want is that the poor people should enjoy themselves, and to make the day so that the village children shall remember it. I have brought a case of medals to give them. We sketched a programme—I'll show it to you to-morrow; perhaps Mr. Gower may have something to suggest. But papa entrusts our part entirely to me."

I was left to my own discernment for the second person in the *we* who sketched the programme. It was not Helen, for I gave her an interrogative glance, and she responded with a negative movement of her head—it was then Prince Charming. I said to myself that I would ask no more questions, but would wait until I saw them together. I began to doubt my own past conclusions, and to revolve them again in my mind; and though I saw Helen twice again between that evening and Mr. Barrington's arrival with his train of gentlemen, by tacit consent we refrained from all allusion to Captain Gresham—a very severe piece of self-denial on my part. With Felicia the avoidance of his name was easier, strange as that may seem. She could write in play what she could not talk of to my face without blushing in earnest, and with the new light that was breaking in upon me it would have been unkind to rally her. I think she was relieved to find that I let her alone.

My perplexity was not to be very long drawn out. Arthur and I dined at the Manor on the

evening of Mr. Barrington's return. There was a large party, so large a party, with such a preponderance of young people, that somebody proposed a lawn-dance afterwards, which was joyfully acceded to. There were delightful opportunities for any lovers amongst them to prosecute their love-making, and some were not slow to avail themselves of the occasion. Mr. Courteney and Blanche Bethell danced together, and then strolled off in the shade somewhere out of sight; and Tom Claylands was assiduous in trying to draw Rose away from the crowd, but Rose was disdainful. The night was warm and clear, starlight and lamp-lit, on the terrace, but in the grovy seclusions grey with the summer twilight that is never darkness the whole night round. Several of the gentlemen had lit their cigars, and there was plenty of laughter and noise amongst the groups in front of the house where I stayed, sitting below one of the open drawing-room windows. Helen was playing for the dancers in the music-room adjoining, and between the dances she came and leant out and talked to me.

She asked me once where Felicia was. At the moment Felicia was stepping across the lawn with swift, graceful motion to meet Prince Charming ; she made him a sweeping low curtsey and offered her hand. He took it with an air and a bow as merry-mocking, laid his other hand on his heart, then whirled her round in a waltz. The lawn was soon covered with waltzers to a melting tune, and they kept it up till they were breathless. Felicia and the Prince had vanished when it was over, but a few minutes after she re-appeared alone, and came and seated herself by me.

“Tired, Felicia?” said I, for I was growing drowsy myself. She did not answer me, did not seem to hear me.

She sighed, and sighed again, looking on at the next dance that was set; I could feel the tremor and excitement that were in her, though she neither moved nor spoke. There was an interruption of her agitated thoughts.

“Oh, Felicia, here you are! come along—this is my quadrille,” cried the cheerful voice of George Sylvester advancing.

“Let me off this time, George—you don’t mind letting me off?” pleaded she in an urgent tone. “There’s Rosy disengaged.” George said no more, but sped to Rosy and took her.!

While the quadrille was still in progress Captain Gresham came by that way. He saw Felicia I know, but he passed as if he did not see her. Then he came back, and though they neither danced together again, nor spoke so far as I saw, each kept the other constantly in sight. I began to understand it. There was love, and conscious love on both sides, but on his a self-restraint that did him honour. I think that evening discovered to Felicia the principles that strove with his inclinations, and that she was suddenly alarmed and fearful lest the happiness that had been revealed to her should prove only a mirage. A thousand fluctuations trouble the tender soul in such a case as hers. She had heard it said continually how girls of fortune are sought for their money, and how men of independent, proud spirit avoid them. And her Prince Charming had the pride of Lucifer. He had many faults, many

qualities impossible to praise; but he was very loveable with them all.

The next morning I received a visit from Captain Gresham. With his strength, he, was recovering his beauty—nobody could object to the mark of the sword-cut, which had severed his left eye-brow and gashed his cheek to the ear, as a blemish; in fact, it was not at all disfiguring when one remembered where he had got it. He was a fine-looking person, then and always, one of those men who carry an acceptable letter of introduction in their faces. I recollect thinking as he sat on the grass that morning how sweet his expression was when he laughed and kissed my little girl, who plunged into his arms without any invitation, and how repellent it became a minute or two after when he was speaking of certain circumstances that displeased him. He betrayed none of the vagaries popularly attributed to a man in love, but was perfectly cool, measured, and self-possessed in manner and in conversation. He did not name Felicia, neither did I, directly, but much that we said was undoubtedly allusive.

"If we are to have a settled peace, I'll exchange and go to India; nothing bores me like garrison duty at home," said he.

"You deserve a longer rest after your campaigning; and do you think India will suit you?"

"Any place will suit me out of the way of worry. This life is not my life, you very well know, and it cannot go on; Helen reminds me that it cannot: I know without reminding—my mother is not any more liberal than she was. India may be dull, I daresay it is dull, but it will be a dulness that I have not tried—and there is sport."

"Don't be in haste to go—why should you? A year in England surely you can endure—we should all be sorry to see you leave. Your health can hardly be considered quite re-established yet."

He looked at me with grave inquiry; his eyes were the most changeful for a man that ever I saw, and windows of his thoughts always. I apprehended that grave subtle look, and kept the blinds of mine down, lest I should show what I ought not. He was baffled. "Why should any

of you be sorry to see me leave? Canterbury or Calcutta, what does it matter where I am, if I am out of reach? If Trefusis and I can get an exchange together, Christmas will not see us here."

"Is it so bad with you as that?" this was a foolish speech; it slipped out unawares, as foolish speeches have a trick of doing.

"Yes, it is as bad with me as that," he replied, this time without looking at me. He was looking straight before him, and seeing nothing—unless it were a reluctant sacrifice.

We were silent for several minutes; if he had continued to speak it would have been in confession, and just on the brink of it, I felt scared. It was a welcome diversion for me when Mr. Ralph Barrington showed his yellow visage through the bushes that shaded the corner of the lawn where we were, and invited himself to join us.

"What are you two confabulating over with such rueful countenances?" he inquired, displacing my work-basket on the garden-seat that he might sit down himself.

"About the policy of my exchanging for India," answered Captain Gresham readily.

"Very wise step. I always wonder how you young paladins survive the laborious inaction of country quarters—not that an Indian station, in quiet times, is much livelier, by all accounts."

"You would advise me to go, then?"

"Nay, my good fellow, don't put words into my mouth—I advise no man on his private affairs. How should I know what reasons you may have for wishing to put half the world betwixt you and home? The Jews—an entanglement——"

"I have no reasons of either nature."

"A temptation to fly."

"That is nearer the mark."

"Fly it then — especially if it concerns a woman; be sure if you play with it, you will fall upon mischief; women are the very devil for mischief, always were. I know them!"

Now it was a supreme bit of affectation in Mr. Ralph Barrington to profess so deep and bad a knowledge of women; for the only woman with whom his name had ever been connected was

a good and beautiful person whom, with a selfish vanity which had been justly mortified in the results, he had tried to hold on and off for several years, unwilling to relinquish the freedom and pleasures of bachelorhood, and equally unwilling to lose the prospect of ultimate happiness with her when he was tired of his own way. She tired of them first, gave him his *congé* and married elsewhere. Since that event he had consistently and on all occasions abused the sex. I have noticed it in other men and in women too, that when they have been most in fault themselves, they are most prone to shower a general vituperative blame and condemnation on the other side.

“If Captain Gresham be wise he will judge us as he finds us,” said I, defying my cynical kinsman. “There is no experience less worth a man’s borrowing than another man’s experience of women.”

“Cousin Clare, allow me to compliment you on a very remarkable degree of shrewdness. Captain Gresham is still young; he believes all the poetical fables that have ever been written, said or sung in

your praise—you may practise on his credulity yet to any extent. And the deception is so fascinating while it lasts that, perhaps, we old foxes who have found you out, ought to be on honour to keep your secrets."

"Your attack is cowardly! You forget that in the process of learning our secrets, you give us the key to your own. If we had the same liberty of speech as you and the same unscrupulousness in proclaiming our dismal knowledge, could none of us tell tales of you?"

"What a vixen! Lord, what a vixen!" cried the misogynist, laughing and raising his hands.

Captain Gresham laughed too, but did not take his part. "Never mind, Mrs. Gower, I am on your side. I have the highest respect for women, and the liveliest admiration. I don't believe there is a bad one that a man has not made."

"Ah, Gresham wishes to pay his court: he has some deep mysterious game on hand, and wants the aid of the sex to help him win it," retorted Mr. Ralph Barrington, and his eyes, like sparks of steel, shot a keen but not ill-natured suspicion

at the younger man. Captain Gresham returned his glance with an intrepid frankness, but his colour deepened, and he was at a loss for a rejoinder, though the insinuation was perfectly untrue.

“It seems that you entertain as low an opinion of your own sex as of ours, Cousin Ralph,” said I. “If *we* are rogues, *you* are knaves and fools.”

“So we are, where the rogues are concerned; far be it from me to deny it! And here come three as choice rogues as any nature ever invented for our perversion—roguey is bred in *you*, mind; *we* have to learn our knavish tricks.” It was impossible to be even with Mr. Ralph Barrington; he invariably got the last word.

The three rogues he espied were Felicia, Rosè and Blanche, affectionately intertwined, advancing over the lawn. They had come from a walk on the Langhill. In the country, amongst idle people, there is always a tendency to gravitate to one spot. It was luncheon-time now; Arthur joined us, and I gave them an impromptu feast on the

lawn, after warning them that it would be a feast of cottage fare. They took it, and were thankful, and stayed till four o'clock, literally to get rid of time. Then Felicia had to go, and dress for her ride; and she reminded her Uncle Ralph, as she was preparing to leave us, that he had promised her his company this afternoon.

"Make it to-morrow, Felicy—it is too hot," said he excusing himself. "I am an old fellow, soon knocked up."

"Ah, that is always the way with papa and you," she began plaintively, when Captain Gresham, speaking with cheerful alacrity, said how glad he should be if he might attend her.

"You have *my* permission, be off with you," said Mr. Ralph Barrington; while Felicia looked up at him shyly and brightened, and said in a voice now blithe enough that it was tiresome riding day after day alone; and they went away together—"as happy as rogue and fool could be," the misogynist would have said, if he had given his thoughts vent. Soon after their departure I dismissed my other visitors, for I had my duties

in the village to do, and it was now sufficiently cool to walk about with pleasure.

Felicia had entreated us to go over to the Manor evening by evening, if we could spare the leisure, for her papa was a great lover of society, and the more people he saw about him the better pleased he was. It was not much to require, for hours were late there, and our day's work done almost before their revels began. She seemed happy since her ride, very happy, I thought, and Prince Charming did not belie the pretty pseudonym she had conferred upon him. There was a dinner-party again, the guests staying in the house, and another selection of agreeable neighbours who lived within a drive. Felicia told me that she had arranged some entertainment for each night.

"For if papa is left to himself, he gets bored, and then away he goes," she said. "And he likes to see his friends and acquaintances in his own house much better than to go to theirs. He hates whatever gives him trouble—so does Uncle Ralph—so did grandpapa Barrington, and that is

why dear old grandmamma has to live at Hampton Court. It is lucky that I have a strain of the Bethells in me, and want to be stirring sometimes, or we should have come to a dead-lock about our Peace Festival. What a clog indifferentism is! one can make faster progress against a hearty opposition!"

She was right there. More than once it had seemed as if this celebration on which her heart was set would fall through. Mr. Barrington was a provokingly selfish person, where his own ease and peace were involved. "What is the good of it?" "Who will care to come?" "It will be a world of annoyance for no profit." "I cannot imagine what possesses you to make such a fuss about the poor people," "The gardens will be trampled to pieces," "The men will get drunk," "I hope you don't expect me to fatigue myself as president at the feast"—these and many more such trivial tiresome objections she had to overcome. "Dear papa," she said at last, "I expect nothing from you but what belongs to your position as Mr. Barrington of Stoneleigh. You will exert

yourself for a few hours to support that—you *promised me.*"

I wonder how often Felicia had to plead "*you promised me.*" Mr. Barrington was always ready to promise, but the time of fulfilment often found him remiss. He wished the whole business over; and what even I had not anticipated from him, he expressed a hope that there would be no unnecessary expense — a sentiment that deeply chagrined his daughter.

Fortunately, all was now arranged. Arthur had revised the programme which Felicia and Prince Charming had originated. There was to be a procession from the school with banners and music; a short service in church, the orthodox dinner under a vast tent, games, a general tea, and a dance after; and bells all day, with a bonfire at night, and a grand display of rockets and Roman candles.

CHAPTER X.

A VILLAGE FESTIVAL.

IF the day had been made to order for our festival it could not have been more propitious. When I looked out from my window, the grass was glittering with dew, the leaves were shining with moisture, a white haze was exhaling from the unreaped cornfields and the rich meadows towards the river. The dense foliage of the Great Oaks looked full of cool shade, and all was so hushed and quiet that it felt like a beautiful Sunday morning. There were no sounds from the wheelwright's yard, nor from the blacksmith's forge; no farmers' wains upon the road, nor any stir of labour at all. Felicia had decreed a general holiday, and she had Queen's weather for it;

the dear child was ever fortunate in her holidays for other people.

The first break in the tranquillity came from overhead, from the church-tower. We had a famous peal of bells, and as the ringers warmed to their work, I was not unthankful to have to forsake my own roof and go elsewhere. In the night, or since the dawn, had sprung up around the Manor a grove of green arches, flags, patriotic sentiments in flowers, the great tent and all the machinery of the feast. Felicia was on the lawn with George Sylvester. She came forward to meet me, her hands outstretched in eager welcome, and looking so blithe and lovely in her snow-drop costume of white and green. Her anxieties were at an end, and she was now all at leisure.

"Everybody has obeyed orders exactly," she announced. "Everything is in train to go well, and we have no more to do until it is time to walk to the school, and set the children in procession for church."

"Therefore I propose that we should sit down in the cool, and reserve our forces for the busier

hours of the day," said sensible George, who had shared with Felicia the chief labour of organizing the festival.

We sat down accordingly under the aromatic shade of the old cedars at the east end of the house. Rose and Blanche, attired like their cousin, joined us, and we discussed coming events. The Bethell girls were fluent talkers, like their father, and for ever so long they kept up the ball with George almost to the exclusion of Felicia. I perceived that she was waiting her opportunity to speak, and at last, she got it. "Oh, Cousin Clare, I had forgotten to tell you—such good news, such an unexpected addition to our glories!" she began, addressing me across the circle, when Blanche, impatient to hear her own voice again, resolutely interrupted.

"Let *me* tell! Last night Felicy remembered Old Crotchets—Uncle Alfred said: 'Don't ask him, he will bore us all to extinction,' but this amiable Felicy, who cannot bear to wound anybody's feelings, declared that it would be too ungracious to leave him out of her first public

entertainment. And she has her reward : he wrote her three lines—he would certainly come, and might he bring his brother James—you know who that is ? General Sir James Cartwright. Think of the honour ! Two Crimean heroes ! was there ever such luck as Felicity's ? ”

“ It is a pity though that Prince Charming's laurels should be so overshadowed,” said Rose, with that slight inflection of the voice which conveys a sneer. Who gave her licence to use that name ? They all seemed to be familiar with it, however, and Felicia manifested no self-consciousness.

“ Why should his laurels be overshadowed ? ” said she. “ What rivalry can be possible between a veteran like General Cartwright and a young soldier whose distinction rests on a conspicuous instance of personal valour ? When Prince Charming has fought in as many wars as the General, he will be as famous.” I liked to hear Felicia give her opinion freely. Rose was conceited ; she had somehow achieved a reputation for wisdom and sagacity, which she was rather

too fond of airing for the benefit of her young friends.

At this moment Prince Charming himself came in view, sauntering towards us with Felicia's white umbrella up. He was in splendid good-humour this morning, and his beautiful hostess and he spoke to each other with the pleasantest assumption of mutual understanding. I was glad that he was not going to spoil Felicia's happy day. He had apparently given himself leave since their ride together to be as engaging as time and circumstances would allow. He loved her, and there was a sweet wistfulness in her eyes as she looked up to him, that betrayed much more than she was conscious of. The Bethell girls exchanged glances of much significance. Some people might be blind, but they were not, and George Sylvester was not. He had found them out, and like the honest good fellow he was, showed himself only generous. There was a truer devotion to her in his heart now than in the other man's; but he was of a very different disposition, and discerning Felicia's preference, he was not

likely to stand in Captain Gresham's way, or to vex her tender soul overmuch with the spectacle of his own disappointment. She made frank use of him, like the best of brothers; it was the relative position in which they had grown up, and Felicia had no idea of his desiring any other. Yet for all this, Captain Gresham was less cordial with George than George was willing to be with him; it seemed that he was jealous of that habit of intimacy which gave George a hundred little advantages and privileges that he could lay no claim to. George made no sign of observing this; possibly he did not observe it. They had been friends a long while, and his was the peace fullest, least exacting of tempers:—a blessed distribution of feeling as it turned out; with a more eager and passionate character, he would have had a world more to suffer through what afterwards befel.

The clamour of the bells ceased suddenly. "That is the sign—time to go to the school; now, George, you must come with me—you too, Cousin Clare: Rose and Blanche will not tire

themselves, I know," said Felicia, rising with alacrity.

"It is of no good to heat ourselves by toiling down the hill, just to toil up again," Blanche acquiesced.

"They were to make a rough sketch of a procession in the road for us to give it the finishing touches—where is my flag? You carry it, George. Yes, I have a flag, I head the march," Felicia said. Her cousins laughed, and thought the Lady of the Manor might have left that to the school-mistress, or to me, the parson's wife. But the fact was Felicia liked to make regulations of her own amongst the children; she knew them every one, and had a high sense of her responsibility to all growing up on her territory. Nor was she in the least disposed to resign her own duties to other persons. I judged it an admirable trait in her, but some of her friends called it sheer love of authority and management. It was not that, certainly: it was filling her place, doing her business.

"Have you no commission for me?" asked Prince Charming.

"You may come with us, if you please," said Felicia. Again Rose and Blanche exchanged a meaning look; they were far too unreserved in this sort of telegraphy, for good manners.

Captain Gresham would have been as well out of the way; he went, however, and rested in the shadow of the school-house porch while we marshalled the children in line. When they were all ready, Felicia took the lead, and in the hymn of victory which they sang as they marched, her voice sounded like a silver trumpet above the pipes of the little children. George Sylvester was in the van, too, singing like a lark, but Captain Gresham did not condescend to swell the volume of sweet sound, nobly as we set him the example. He felt out of his element, and as he and I brought up the rear of the procession together, he melted away from it into the general throng assembled in the churchyard to see the children arrive. Every one was there from the Manor except Mr. Barrington—he was not fond of church, and thought nothing of setting an example; the dowager with a party from the Dower House was

present, and George Sylvester's sisters, escorted by old Mr. Willis, who held by the hand the elder of his two grandsons. Every eye rested with pitiful respect on that little man in black and the old rector. The tenant-farmers had mustered in force with their wives and daughters, and none of the village community were missing except the bed-ridden. Infants in arms had proved no obstacle. Several were there, babes and sucklings, whose mothers had too much spirit to stop at home when the rest of the world were making holiday. Poor young widow Burt was amongst them; she had made an effort to come, not for distraction, but for her dead soldier's sake. She sat by the door through the prayers, fretting softly, but in the middle of Arthur's address, when he alluded to those who had fallen in the war, her grief overcame her, and she stole away. I did not see her at the Manor, but her mother-in-law kept the feast; pride in her lost son and the praises of her neighbours sustained her. She was a stiff old woman, full of the true English sense of duty, decorum, and religion. The

daughter could only dwell on her bereavement, and she was besides fallen out of health.

Felicia was organist that day, and had chosen the brightest music. The bells broke forth again in lusty peals as we left the church with hearts cheered and uplifted; and when they ceased, the rival bands from Gladestone, stationed at opposite extremities of the grounds, that their strains might not interfere with each other, began to play, and gave nobody's spirits time to flag. We each had our cue who were to help in entertaining the village, and mine was to supervise the children, and manœuvre them through the gardens to a grassed alley, where they could sit safe on the turf, and eat pic-nic style the good things awaiting them. The great tent was on the bowling-green, and there George Sylvester was master of the revels. When I came with my numerous flock upon the lawn, Felicia, who was there with Mr. Barrington, receiving their guests, made them halt on the terrace a little while, to regale their astonished eyes with the gay flowers and pretty dresses of the ladies, which delighted them

amazingly. Children love a fine show, and the weather was so favourable to display, that it would be hazardous to assert whether the ladies or the flowers were the finest.

There had been several arrivals from a distance during the service, amongst them Mr. Tom Bethell, his handsome wife and handsome second family—all who were firm on their pins, that is (the cradle was still an institution at Ringwood). The Aber-shaws, Claylands, and Strangways, came in quick succession, and a host of people from Gladestone, with whom I had very slight or no acquaintance. The most notable of the strangers was Felicia's fortunate acquisition, General Sir James Cartwright, for whom the school-children, to our surprise and amusement, and also much to his own, burst into a shrill, spontaneous cheer. They had heard his name in many a fireside story, and Felicia had said a few words to remind them of it before they went to church; and the redoubtable veteran looked so towering, grand, and white-bearded as he passed in front of them that their admiration could not contain itself. It was an

incident to set us laughing, a beginning of good fellowship for the day. The General took kind notice of the children, and I saw him lift little Willis in his arms, and speak to the sad old rector of Bylands of the gallant son whom the fortune of war had robbed him of. And then I moved away with my charge, increased now by my own Jack and Lizzie, the smaller Bethells, some baby Abershaws, and Jenny Sylvester, who was so fond of children that she would come and help me entertain them.

I cannot tell how Felicia managed it, but she had the faculty, more than any one else I ever met, of effacing social hard lines on such an occasion as this, and making everybody feel that their humanity was deeper and more real than the outward and visible insignia of their condition. Rigid people relaxed within the sphere of her influence, and became natural, hearty, genial. She set them the example; and was so sure of the affection and respect of her humble friends that she could be equally cordial to all, gentle and simple.

The elder guests were jovial in the great tent, to judge from the softened cheers that reached us at intervals in our shaded alley, and the young generation were merry, as I can testify from my own experience. They made as pretty an avenue of little figures and fresh little faces of boys and girls as any Lady Bountiful could wish to see. Each had a blue ribbon and a Peace Medal for decoration, and each had a pair of bright eyes lifted up in loving reverent admiration to Felicia as she paced slowly down the alley between the two lines, and Prince Charming after her. She smiled like sweetness itself, and spoke to one and another, and then she paced back again; and in many an affectionate memory of those young things grown-up that sunny picture of her remains as clear as yesterday. I think myself that I can see her now, and Prince Charming watching her with an amused gleam in his eyes that was only half appreciative of the fun. He had no taste for such very unselfish, simple pleasures, and seemed rather to misunderstand his lady-love's radiant enjoyment. If he had not known her so well,

he would probably have called this celebration, "popularity hunting"—as her cousin Rose Bethel did. After her progress Felicia took her stand at one end of the avenue, and Jenny Sylvester and I at the other, and a grace was sung. Then the children all sat down again, and we made ourselves busy serving them with cakes and pasties most delicious. It was a treat to witness their genuine satisfaction in something good to eat. This is a pleasure children savour as keenly as the most refined *gourmand* extant, and for the next twenty minutes it absorbed them wholly.

When I looked round for Felicia again, she and the Prince had disappeared.

There was lunch in the dining-room for the "quality-folk," but a few of them, busy like myself in special departments, evaded that part of the festival, and George Sylvester, like a clever caterer, found out Jenny and me in our alley, and sent a servant with supplies and a message that he and Tom Claylands were coming in a few

minutes to share them. They brought Miss Reed, whom George had discovered sitting disconsolate under a tree all alone by herself. Felicia had commissioned him to sweep up those diffident neutrals who would not dine in the tent, and yet could not muster courage to join the select assemblage in the dining-room: there are always some at every mixed gathering of the sort, who, if they are not looked after, go without dinner, and spend a miserable holiday, hungry, thirsty, and, worst of all, in tortures of wounded pride which may last them their lives. George and Tom, good-natured young fellows who were known more or less to everybody, proved capital aids in bringing up the stragglers. Tom told 'me that they had caught and disposed of them all, he believed.

“The Miss Drouets and their clever brother are under the cedars with the Brewers and Buckrams, and Miss Rigg, our governess. They are probably looking down on her as a poor thing who has to teach, and she is despising them as fat tradesfolks without an H in their composition. So they are all comfortable in their minds, and

they have a splendid pigeon-pie and lots beside for the sustentation of their bodies."

"You did not forget sherry, Tom?" cried George in alarm for the credit of the Manor hospitality.

"There was bitter ale in plenty——"

"Go and see that they have sherry, and claret-cup—and grapes, *grapes*, Tom!"

Tom was off like a shot to repair his neglects. He came back almost as quickly, and reported that young Drouet had discovered sherry for the party on his own account, and that they were also in possession of a magnificent pine. "Drouet knows what's what—he has not been ten years a parliamentary reporter without sharpening his wits. The ladies are as lively as possible. Miss Rigg is unbending from her dignified reserve. The discordant elements are all fusing delightfully."

"Bays might like to join them if there is a London newspaper man there—or we could have brought him here—he is a friend of yours, Miss Reed," said George reflectively.

Miss Reed denied the imputation—Mr. Bays was no friend of hers, oh, no !

“The poet Bays is best where he is ; he likes to moon about with nobody but his pipe ; it is meat, drink, and inspiration to him,” said Tom. “Well, not exactly drink, perhaps,” he added, correcting himself. “But he is never quarrelsome in his cups, so never mind.”

With consciences at ease, we five now settled down to our little by-plot in the festival, Miss Reed testifying with a gush that she was most happy to find herself in my company. She said she had been looking for me ever since we came out of church. “For you are always good to the waifs and strays and poor dependents, dear Mrs. Gower.” I expressed my hope rather coldly that she did not put herself into that category ; for I was quite sure she had not been idle in her vocation. If she had been unable to find me, I had not been blind to her presence, slipping from group to group, from place to place, but always keeping Felicia under her observation.

As we regaled George gave us an account of

how the feast had gone in the tent—noisily and joyously, and to the exuberant satisfaction of both insiders and outsiders. There had been toasts and healths drunk, and General Cartwright, answering for “The Army,” had given great honour to Captain Gresham. “That boy,” he called him, “whose valour had made him a hero amongst heroes.”

“*Somebody* was pleased,” added Tom Claylands, nodding to me. Miss Reed simpered and sighed.

“Who does *somebody* mean?” she inquired.

“You *know*,” rejoined Tom.

George said nothing. Jenny opened her eyes wide with curiosity. To-morrow, thought I, the secret will be out, and all the neighbourhood discussing it.

We fell silent after Tom’s indiscreet allusion, and were just about to forsake the fragments of our feast when there appeared suddenly through the bushes close behind us, a small, youngish lady, handsome and well-dressed, a perfect stranger to me. She smiled, colouring and

hesitating to advance, but George instantly jumped up, and inquired if she had come out from luncheon.

"No," she said, "I am afraid I have missed everything. I wandered away by myself to the river. There was a boy in an old boat, and it looked so beautiful beyond that I asked him to row me over to see the town and castle."

"It is a mercy that you have got safe back! You must be hungry, I'm sure," said George, and instantly he prepared a place for her, and gave her roast lamb, salad, claret-cup, waiting upon her so assiduously that I imagined them to be intimate friends—only he had forgotten the ceremony of introduction.

Jenny Sylvester and Tom Claylands now went off in quest of more amusement, and when the stranger was provided for and established at her ease, George went too, commending her with a few last words to the care of Miss Reed and myself. She was a quiet little woman, full of intelligence and experience of travel. She spoke with a slightly provincial northern accent, but her

voice was cultivated, and her air and manner those of a person in a position of authority, and possessed of much natural dignity besides. She was leisurely enjoying her luncheon when Mr. Tom Bethell came lounging into the alley, and dropt on the turf amongst us with a supercilious and disgusted air.

"These public days are my aversion," snarled he. "One never knows who one may meet!"

The strange lady looked him over with a soft humorous twinkle in her fine grey eyes, speculating probably who *he* was; for, to a casual acquaintance, Mr. Tom Bethell looked like one of those men who live by horses. His arrival was a sign that the select luncheon was over, and our secluded retreat became open now to constant incursions. Amongst many others who came and went was Mr. Cartwright of Beechcroft (popularly Old Crotchets) accompanied by a large fine-looking man who walked with his hat in his hand, and conversed in a loud animated voice of certain projected railway-works in our neighbourhood.

"Who's this with Old Crotchets?" asked Tom Bethell. "I never saw *him* before."

"That is Falkner, the civil engineer," said the little lady blithely.

"Oh, indeed! I thought he was not a gentleman," muttered Tom Bethell.

"If you were both to sell which do you think would fetch the better price? I fear your friends would have to let you go very cheap in comparison with Robert Falkner. He's my brother," rejoined the lady laughing with a frank good-humour that Tom found it impossible to imitate. His face turned the colour of a mulberry, and every one of us felt confused except herself. She was not at all so; indeed, the professional reputation of her brother was world-wide, and she might well be proud of him. I don't know what Tom Bethell meant by saying he thought Mr. Falkner was not a gentleman; he was a man of presence so distinguished that in every company where he was unknown by sight, it was sure to be asked, as Tom himself had asked—Who is he?

I was much amused later in the day when our

cheap gentleman apprised me in a whisper that Mr. Falkner was actually staying on a visit at *the Duke's*, "One of those engineer-fellows who have been the ruin of the country! But," added he in a mournful cadence, "when the Duke officiates as chairman of a railway company and an iron-working company on his own territory, it is all of a piece that he should entertain snobs at Lowndes Castle. The democracy are fast getting the upper hand in England—it is a terrible state of things to look forward to! We are on the verge of a revolution—mark my words."

The village children had now been conducted to the orchard where they could skip about to the sound of the music, or play any of their common games. The village mothers were there too, vigilant of eyes and tongue. The Langhill was in favour as a place for walking about, and resting in cool shade. There was croquet on the lawns, and cricket in the cricket-field, and pipes for the old men: and the state-rooms of the Manor House were open to the inspection

of all who loved fine pictures, curiosities, and antique furniture. The only apartment closed against the crowd, was Felicia's boudoir, to which she had invited me to go in the afternoon. Helen was to make tea there for her select friends at five o'clock. I was tired and went early, as soon as I was quit of my duty to the children, indeed. The boudoir was empty when I entered it, and I took my ease for a long hour before anybody came; sufficiently amused by watching from the windows the sportive groups on the Langhill, and the gay parties of croquet-players on the lawn.

Lookers-on certainly see most of the game:— I was just quoting this truism apropos of croquet, when Felicia and Prince Charming passed along the terrace together, and Mr. Tom Bethell met them with a demonstratively agreeable air, and tried to engage them in talk. Apparently they had another object in view, for they kept moving on, and he halting, pursuing, retreating, as if he did not know whether, to let them escape, or to go with them. Finally he let them escape,

and the next minute he was holding the dowager in conversation. She seemed to treat his communications very lightly, and to waft them off with a dainty flutter of her fingers. The old-lady grandmamma was very brilliant that day, and very proud and fond of Felicia, as none could fail to see who observed them together.

An idea flashed into my mind all in a moment:—this was it. Tom Bethell knows as well as I do that Captain Gresham and Felicia are on the brink of involving themselves in a *grande passion*. He encourages it—and utters warnings of it. He is really glad that they should do it. And why? Because he knows that obstacles will be put in their way—that Gresham is proud; that Felicia is constant in love, and hindered of marrying where her heart is set, may refuse to marry at all; that she is devoted to her father, capable of vast sacrifices, of what ascetic theorists style “noble acts of self-renunciation,” of what I, being a mere woman, denounce as wrong-headed, one-sided, blind and foolish acts; almost always fruitful of misery to the doer, and barren of good

to those on whose behalf they are done. I was profoundly musing on this revelation when Helen came up behind me unperceived, and offered me a penny for my thoughts. I gave her them for nothing.

"How is it that we have made up our minds to anticipate for Felicia a life of disappointments?" said she. "We have done so. I reason against it, and yet I cannot help feeling that sorrow is being sown for her."

"They are selfish, her people; they deserve no sacrifice, least of all her father. I hope she will convince them at a pinch, that she has a will of her own."

Just then Felicia entered alone. She was looking beautiful and happy as the day, with a wistful softness in her eyes. She came up and kissed me, blushing, and I asked her: "What now?" but she went out again without answering. Helen and I looked one at the other, and Helen said: "She walks on air."

We thought more than we talked until Janet came in with the tea-equipage, closely followed

by the dowager and Lady Cartwright, with the General. Next arrived Felicia and Rose and others, until soon the boudoir was filled and overflowing into the gallery. Miss Reed perched up in a window-seat commanded a view of the whole company. I would have given a penny for *her* thoughts many times that day. After this early refreshing tea, some of the guests prepared to take leave. Amongst the first to go were Mr. Falkner and his sister.

“Come Kitty, I want to catch the seven o'clock train to London at Gladestone,” I heard him whisper to her, and as “Kitty” was, at the moment, in conversation with me, I went downstairs with her to the carriage. On the steps was standing Miss Colquhoun, a lady-preacher of note to navvies and soldiers, a large, handsome personage, to me very formidable, whom I never encountered if I could help it. But we were civil when we did meet — her civility being blended with a slight contempt of me as frivolous and not sufficiently parsonic for a parson's wife. As Mr. Falkner appeared she bowed most

graciously. He glanced at her, and bowed again, not recognizing her apparently.

"Miss Colquhoun—the lady at the mission-house," said she, introducing herself benignantly.

Mr. Falkner bowed once more: "You want to get home—shall we give you a lift?" suggested he, at the same time assisting his sister to her seat in the carriage.

Miss Colquhoun intimated her acceptance of the offer, but did not stir a foot towards it; instead she began to make a speech, deprecatory, apologetic, diffuse as her manner was. "Kitty" resented it. She evidently knew nothing of our female light of the world, for she knitted her brows, and exclaimed in a prompt voice: "Never mind talking: jump in; tide and train wait for no man." Miss Colquhoun stopt, stared, obeyed, and was whirled out of sight and hearing suddenly.

O, thought I, for a Miss Falkner often to abridge your discourses! For Miss Colquhoun was a burden to us; an honour and glory, I don't deny, but still a burden from her excess of virtue, and her inexhaustible mission for meddling and doing good.

The departures were continuous after this until all the gentry were gone except those who were lodged at the Manor. "It has been a perfect day," Felicia murmured with a happy sigh as I said good-night. "I suppose you will not go up to the bonfire?" No, I said, I was too tired to climb the hill, but I should see it from my window. And so I did, blazing until the morning. And this was how we celebrated the peace at Stoneleigh.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE DOWER HOUSE.

THE next day the Manor House was almost deserted; only Uncle Ralph remained of the visitors, and he left at the end of the week with Mr. Barrington, on his way to Homburg. Felicia kept her happy face through all: she had the talisman which charms a solitude into a golden dreamland. Prince Charming was no further off yet than Bylands, where he was spending a few days with his widowed sister Mrs. Willis. It was quite natural that he should bring her over to call on Felicia, and that the call should be lengthened out into an afternoon together; and perhaps it was quite as natural, that Felicia and her lover, favoured by opportunity, should come to a true

understanding of each other's sentiments. She told me afterwards in not many words. He was about to leave her—perhaps he read in her wistful eyes an invitation to linger—and he told her all that was in his heart. I have doubted since whether he would have found the courage even *then*, had he not been so sure that she had given him her own.

Before we slept that night Helen and I both knew what had happened, and Felicia had promised us that she would confide in her grand-mamma Bethell, and write on the morrow to her father, of whose indulgence she seemed to entertain no question.

“Papa will be thankful to turn me over to another master—it will save him trouble,” she gaily asserted ; and then she besought me to drive with her to the Dower House the next day—to give her a countenance.

It was rather provoking when we arrived to find the Ringwood girls there, who laid forcible hands on Felicia, and bore her off to croquet : she not so loth to go as at another time she might have been.

The dowager undertook my entertainment, and to my scarcely dissembled dismay, began at once upon the great business that had brought us there—from another point of view, of course. I let her talk on without interruption until she paused of her own accord: for I felt my position awkward enough, as may be imagined.

“Dear Mrs. Gower, you are the very person I wanted to see! Reed has been filling my ears ever since breakfast with stories of Felicia having fallen overhead in love with yesterday’s hero, Captain Gresham! I am horrified! Such a match *never* would be allowed, you know; and if there be a beginning of a partiality, we must all combine quietly to ignore it—eh? Reed, with her tactics, would drive at it until the faintest impression might be made indelible. Felicia, like all girls, wants careful management. She is susceptible, and will fall in love and out of love a dozen times before she settles. I have no patience with Reed—old-maidish thing who does not know what she is talking about any more than a baby.” Mrs. Bethell conned my

visage shrewdly as she spoke. Amongst Miss Reed's suggestions had probably been one that she should sound me as the head-quarters of information. Being forced to answer, I took up my parable boldly.

"It is a pity if love may not have its way in Felicia's case," I said. "What real objection is there to Captain Gresham? She is a great fortune, but he has personal distinction to set against it: and for disposition, taste, temper, beauty, no two in the world could be more equally yoked."

"Ah, you are romantic! You would encourage the silly child—Reed says you have encouraged her, and are to blame, you and your sister, for whatever may happen."

"Miss Reed is too clever by half. Felicia asked nobody's leave to fall in love——"

"Love! what nonsense! How long does it last?"

"It lasts some of us our lives. It lasted Felicia's mother her life, and stole from her many a sorrow——"

"And made her many. Yes, my poor Lucilla loved her husband — but was he worth her devotion?"

"That is not the question : she was the happier for it; with no other person could she have been so happy as with Mr. Barrington. A lover's imperfections are graces in love's eyes."

"You sentimental little goose!"

I did not mind being called names so long as Mrs. Bethell was diverted from the main subject. She talked copiously of her lost daughter, and I was saved from the hazard of making Felicia's confession indirectly. It would come far the best from herself — she had so pretty a way of saying serious things. My luck was to hear her say this :—when her cousins released her from croquet and went away, she joined her grandmamma and myself under the walnut-tree on the lawn, where we had a fine sheltered seat.

"Grannie, let us have tea out here," she proposed.

"Wherever you please, my treasure." I do

not think her grannie ever now addressed Felicia without some tender word of endearment. She sat down on the grass at the old lady's feet, and leant against her knees, with one arm lying over them, looking up with a sweet emotion in her lovely eyes as she told her tale.

"Am I your treasure? Then bless me, grannie; for I too have found a treasure and I want it consecrated."

"What is the child talking of? what has she found?"

"What is it that is stronger than death? that many waters cannot quench? That is past buying, though one would give all the world for it?"

"I was never quick at riddles, sweetheart," rejoined the old lady with palpable evasion.

"Riddles, grannie! that's scripture. But guess," pleaded Felicia coyly, and then she kissed the soft, wrinkled hand that she had taken in her rosy palms to caress.

"I was never good at guessing, my darling. If it will not bear plain speech, perhaps it is not worth hearing."

"Ah, grannie, but you *do* guess. Now I *know* you guess!"

"If I guess right, even your silver tongue will not make it pleasant intelligence."

"Why not, oh, grannie, tell me why not?" Felicia's voice trembled; so did the old lady's lip. She considered that she was performing a duty: and being painful, it was a severe tax upon her kind, light temperament.

"Because it is hard to deny you—and yet in this you must be denied. My beautiful pearl must look higher for a mate than Captain Gresham; she is a prize for his betters."

"*I!* I am *nothing* unless he love me; grannie, I shall never, never love any one else."

"Never is a long day, jewel! I remember having some such delusion at nineteen; but it passed, and I married your grandfather, and have lived to a good old age." The sprightly dowager spread her hands abroad with the gayest gesture of self-mockery. Felicia gazed at her, moved yet curious: she had evidently heard something of this old story, and was willing to hear more.

"*Your first love—he was a soldier too?*" she said interrogatively.

"Yes, child, he was a soldier, handsome as any in the British army. But his sword was his fortune, and your grandfather had houses and lands——"

"So he *bought you*—oh! grannie, I don't like to believe it! And the *other*?"

"My *beau sabreur*? He left his bones in the Peninsula, my dear, with the rout of Sir John Moore's army:—Life is made up of many events. We don't exhaust the power of it over a single incident. Count up how many dear ones I have lost since:—My parents were both living when the list of dead at Corunna came home. To please them, I married your grandfather, who had courted me in vain for three years——"

"After your true love was dead and gone—not till then? I am glad of that!" interrupted Felicia.

"Not till my hero was dead—he is always my hero. Ah! there were men in those days. But you see, dearie, one cannot weep always. I was young, and nature is strong."

"Yes, grannie, you were quite right; you are much nicer than a cheerless vestal. I too will turn my mind to marrying somebody else when the grass is green upon Prince Charming's grave," whispered Felicia, relapsing into drollery and mischief, now she thought her task over, and her cause won.

"You very heartless thing!" cried the old lady. "Be sure I did not dream consolation possible beforehand. Oh, I had a sad maiden widowhood, I promise you, and almost cried myself blind the first three months."

"And that sorrow made you indulgent to mamma, whose choice, I have been told, was not thought over wise; and it will make you indulgent to me, your poor treasure, will it not? For my Prince is hale and well, God be praised!" Felicia stopped, laughed, blushed—"And here he comes! Be *good* to him, grannie, if you love me!"

It was like a little scene in a play. Captain Gresham had called at the house, and had been sent by the servants to seek their mistress upon

the lawn; and from the remotest point of it he advanced towards us, full in view all the way. I thought I had never seen a handsomer person. Mrs. Bethell thought the same.

“A very proper gentleman to the eye, but my precious Felicia must not set her heart upon him,” said she in the gentlest matter-of-fact key while he was yet beyond hearing. And then she received him as graciously as if her next words would be words of welcome and congratulation.

Captain Gresham was always self-possessed, but he did not look so vastly at his ease as usual. He must have noticed Felicia's disconcerted air, though she rallied soon, and he probably felt that he was being talked about, and perhaps adversely, when he came upon the scene. The dowager and he, nevertheless, exchanged their compliments, inquiries, and small social chat without any diffidence, and the dowager bade him *go*, when Felicia, to beguile him to herself, invited him to see her grandmamma's orangery. As they moved off, I admonished her not to delay me long: a warning

she acknowledged with a sprightly nod, and quite forgot.

Mrs. Bethell now had me at her mercy again. "Dear Mrs. Gower," she began deprecatingly, "you *must not* support that perverse child. You see how easy I am with her—I lay her under no restrictions. It is good and happy for a girl to amuse herself; but when it comes to settling for life, there are other things to be considered besides amusement. Look at it reasonably. Beautiful and accomplished as Felicia is, and with her family and fortune, she is *anybody's* equal, might marry *anybody*." I cordially assented—meaning that to so many blessings she might add yet another, and marry to please herself: but that was not what the dowager meant. She went on. "Then why should she not make a *great* marriage?—you would say that a happy marriage was better—but may not a great marriage be also a happy marriage? Listen: I will confide in you—I have *hopes*" (the simple manœuvrer glanced round as if in dread of an ambush before she gave her hopes tongue), "*hopes* that an alliance may be

brought about between Stoneleigh and the *Castle*." I stared aghast. "You are surprised—yet I assure you that Lady Augusta has thrown out hints—it is *quite* possible—even *probable*. The Marquis intends to range himself——"

"The Marquis? I should call him worse than nobody!" cried I.

"My dear little woman! *do* mind what you say," urged the old lady, laying her right hand impressively on mine, and as shocked as if I had spoken blasphemy. But I persisted.

"*Much* worse than nobody! A man without figure, character, or sense; an ugly little man, and as bad as bad can be! Now I do think D'Israeli the Elder is right when he stigmatizes the small gentry as the most servile class of the people. You would sacrifice Felicia to that contemptible, worthless person, only because he is in the peerage!"

"If I did not know you to be prejudiced, I should tell you that you are very rude,—I *will* tell you that you are uncharitable. Is a young man never to mend his ways, if he be in the peerage?"

Lady Augusta speaks in the highest terms of her brother's excellent disposition ; and Felicia need know nothing of his past courses."

"If there were not another suitor for her in all England, Felicia would never marry the Marquis!"

"We shall see. You must not be so positive what Felicia will or will not do. With our consent she will never marry Captain Gresham ; and disappointed of her first love, she is the sort of girl not to care very much whom she marries. Then rank and a title will weigh with her."

"And you would knowingly reduce her to that state of mind?"

"It was my own when I married ; and I have met few women happier on the whole than myself."

"To my poor judgment it seems a deliberate and cruel wrong."

"You use such harsh terms, dear Mrs. Gower ! You are quite infatuated about Captain Gresham ! Except that he is a good-looking, tall, straight, manly fellow, very gay and pleasant, and with a

reputation for high courage, which thousands share, what peculiar magic has he?"

"That peculiar 'magic' which has charmed Felicia's heart out of her bosom—and there is no use reasoning about it any longer." And there was no time either; for the pair were now visible in the distance, returning to us leisurely. Mrs. Bethell rejoined that I was a more foolish, obstinate, opinionated little woman than she had ever suspected, but she would talk with me again, and bring me to my senses yet.

"You will not bring me to agree with you, if you talk till doomsday," said I, resolutely; for the suggestion concerning the miserable, profligate young Marquis had made me ten times keener an advocate for Captain Gresham than before. How well he and Felicia looked, coming together up the lawn!

I was ready and anxious to be off on our road home now, but Felicia was still inclined to linger. It was hard to tear herself from Prince Charming's company, because it was quite uncertain when they might meet again. She wanted

also to exercise her pretty delusive arts on her grandmamma, to subdue her a little in his favour, and, if possible, to win an acknowledgment of success. But it was all in vain. The dowager was on her guard, though delightfully pleasant and indulgent in her manner. She was very gracious to Captain Gresham, but into her graciousness there entered a measure of condescension which was not encouraging to lovers' hopes. It was as if she had said: "You are two dear young fools; I love and admire you both; but you will not cheat me out of my better judgment." Felicia understood her fully: Captain Gresham only partially, I think. In fact, if Mrs. Bethell intended to persevere in her passive resistance and opposition to their expressed wishes, she ought to have shown him a much less kind and flattering countenance. To be just to her, I believe that she was incapable of realizing that any attachment could be so deep and serious as to influence the whole of a lifetime. Her own experience was against it, and yet she had, no doubt, ardently loved her *beau sabreur*, as she

called him, in the days when she was young. She was now old, and felt herself wiser. She had had her sorrows and her joys, her desires and her disappointments, and so would Felicia have hers, and survive them. It was only those who did not know who talked of anything lasting for ever—or even lasting *long* in this world of changes, and compensations. Experience preaches lucidly—but it is never mature until after the age of the passions. It is *they* that are eloquent, persuasive; and against their eager, subtle arguments the judicial mind that has done with feeling, may plead and argue until patience is spent, and in the end, it will have accomplished nothing. Sufficient for youth is the wisdom thereof: Nature bears out the dictum in a thousand ways, ten thousand times a day.

When we left the Dower House it was late; and we were so tardy in reaching Stoneleigh that Arthur had sent twice to the Manor to ask if we were come. The reason was that Felicia bade the coachman drive very slowly that she might have time to relieve her mind of its new burden before we reached home.

"I am aggrieved, Cousin Clare: I had prepared myself to see grannie as angry as she can be, but to see her not impressed at all is just provoking," said she, after a brief interval of silence. Captain Gresham had brought her to the carriage, and their parting—a final parting for some weeks—was expressive of a mutual trust and resolution. I was quite in their confidence, and there was no other witness. I agreed with her that the kind, courteous-mannered old lady had not taken a true measure of the occasion. She continued:—

"I know exactly how she has determined to act. She will treat this 'love-concern' of mine, as she calls it, on which the joy of my whole life depends, as a matter of the most trivial importance. The passive-resisting-power of people like grannie and papa is far worse to get over than a violent opposition. But I will not be ruled. Prince Charming and I have exchanged our vows, and I shall hold by mine to the death."

My sympathy with her was so profound and perfect that I replied unhesitatingly: "Keep in that mind, Felicia, and you will be happy, and not

a soul the worse for it." She kissed me with grateful enthusiasm.

"You will be our advocate—Cousin Clare, I rely on you," said she, with fervour.

"You *may* rely on me. I pledged myself to your mother when she was dying to give you help and countenance in need, and if you need it in this affair I am on your side against all the opposition that self-interest and pride can array against you."

"If papa is contrary? Oh, there is a deal of pain and perplexity in the world!"

"Weakness is the most fruitful source of both; so be you strong, Felicia, and firm at once. Firm but conciliatory—steady but not aggressive. Record your pledge—let it be widely known, and stick to it. More formidable to your love than either your grannie or papa are their counsellors. I distrust Miss Reed emphatically. And your Uncle Tom will never be a friend to your marriage with anybody—that is my conviction."

"Poor Uncle Tom! I cannot believe him quite so bad as he is painted; and if he be, these

are not the times for wicked uncles to make babes in the wood of nephews and nieces who keep them out of a fine inheritance. Yes, I have heard of Rosy's chatter : I have told her myself that it makes her ill-thought of to speculate on succession to my fortune, which can only happen through my death. It was only on my last birthday I assured her that with my own goodwill I meant to marry and live happily ever afterwards, and to have as many children as it might please God to send me."

"You said that to Rosy? I commend your courage!"

"Yes; she was babbling in her fussy breathless fashion to the Claylands—'Ah, but you know, if Cousin Felicia were out of the way.' I hope it was half in jest, for she only laughed when I cried out upon her. I don't know who besides was cognisant of my declaration—but several persons were. I felt intensely angry, and did not pause to choose pretty, modest words and phrases. Afterwards I took her to task between ourselves; for I am sure that I have been kind to Rosy

and to all of them, and she cried—and then we were friends again. But you will allow, Cousin Clare, that it is exasperating to hear contingencies dilated upon that hang by one's being 'out of the way.' If I were invalidish, and threatening every day to die, I could excuse it—but full of life, and splendid health as I am—I cannot tell you how it rouses my indignation!"

"But I can imagine it. Happily we don't believe in the force of evil wishes."

"I don't suppose that Rosy *really* wishes me any mischief: but she is silly and thoughtless."

"And repeats incautiously other people's idle words."

"That is it. Rosy repeats all she hears, and so inaccurately often that when she begins a story I listen in terror—and she is very fond of telling little stories."

All that evening there was a load upon me. Everybody who knows what it is to have undertaken a pledge and a service that are likely to prove onerous will understand the sensation.

While I was with Felicia, it seemed the most right, most generous, most reasonable thing to uphold her; but away from the exhilaration of her presence, came a revulsion, beset with the doubts and fears of responsibility. *If* I were doing unwisely? *If* I were helping her to wreck her life? *If* I were wrong to advise her against authority?—these were a few of the interrogatories that my conscience put to me. And it was not instantly satisfied with any answer that I could give it. I was never a person to plead good intentions as a make-weight for foolish and faulty acts. I remember sitting by the window after dinner, watching the day darken, my work fallen on my lap, my heart full of disquietude: by no means happy, though certain that I meant to act for the best; and by no means positive I was right, though confident that pure love for Felicia was the sole motive actuating my conduct. People who are not liable to these fluctuations of thought after decision are very enviable. I had no idea of changing my line of policy, and yet I could not help feeling and seeing how capable

it was of presenting to other persons a very different face from that which it presented to me—to Miss Reed, for instance. Nothing would convince a mind of her calibre that I had not some private interest to serve in encouraging Felicia to be constant and persevering in her love against the will of her family. Yet I certainly had none. We are apt to deceive ourselves, but I certainly had no object in what I said or did but the sweet girl's happiness, and if she—But, alas, what is the profit *now* of *ifs*?

CHAPTER XII.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

MR. BARRINGTON did not make as much haste in replying to his daughter's letter as the occasion deserved. She told me that Captain Gresham had written to him also, and that his answer was equally deferred.

"Can papa be ill?" she conjectured.

"Oh, no!" said I to cheer her. "Is he not always dilatory?"

"Yes," she replied; "but he might have written *now*. I often feel as if nobody really cared for me but Janet and Carr, George Sylvester and you. If I loved any one, I am sure I would not keep them in needless suspense. The end of it will be that I shall take my own way, and

not care for other people any more than they care for me."

"Don't be naughty!" said I. "If other people are thoughtless, unkind or selfish, you will suffer none the less by opposing evil with evil."

She dropped her face upon her hands, and *cried* like a child. The hopeless sort of gesture, and the passion of tears took me by surprise. She had seemed more angry than hurt; but, after all, weeping is our way—our first and last resource in trouble!

A full week elapsed between the first day when Felicia had looked for a letter from her father and the day when it came. I saw Helen before I saw the poor girl herself, and Helen told me: "She has said nothing, but from her face I know that it is adverse."

It was one of the most provoking documents that ever man penned! If Felicia had consulted her father about the purchase of a spaniel or a canary, he could hardly have given her a lighter, more frivolous answer. It was clear to me that the dowager had sent Mr. Barrington her version

of the affair, and had spoken of it as a mere caprice, whim, first-fancy, which would pass as easily as it had come, and for which a jesting, airy, treatment was most judicious. If he had seen his daughter when she spoke of it to me he would have changed his mind.

"Captain Gresham will have a right to feel himself affronted if papa has taken this tone with him; for poor me, I must bear it," she said, tremulous with indignation. "Suppose I were to perpetrate some very rash and foolish act, I should only bear out my character. But I am safe with my Prince Charming! He is a great deal better than I am, much higher-minded, and nobler altogether."

"He is good in his way—but don't let us grow defiant on the first contradiction," whispered I, to divert a sort of tearful rage that threatened to overpower her self-control. She turned away to the window for a few minutes, and recovered her calm, but asserted that she was *very* unhappy.

"No, no," urged I, "you are not very unhappy,

because you have confidence that your lover loves you. These little perversities of relations are quite natural under the circumstances—obstacles to prevent the course of your true love running too smoothly. You are both in earnest; neither grannie nor papa can act long as if they believed you to be in play. Don't be impatient, don't be precipitate, and we shall see what we shall see."

"Ah! Cousin Clare, you take refuge in oracular counsels! Acknowledge that I am unfairly used?"

I was quite ready to acknowledge it, for I thought so; but notwithstanding my partisanship, she left me in a discouraged humour.

A very active correspondence now ensued between the lady and her lover. Letters were written and received every day, and for a fortnight no further communication was made to me. But I was not uneasy. I was absolutely of opinion at this time that if Felicia proved steady and resolute she would prevail over opposition, and achieve not only what was best for herself, but also reconcile her real friends in her own family to think so. At the end of the fortnight, she quietly apprised

me that Captain Gresham and herself continued of one mind to maintain their engagement, but that lawful authority would not be openly defied. They would meet when circumstances favoured, and they would correspond whether or no—meaning that leave would be assumed and not asked; and the end they would entrust to time, and the hour when Felicia would be of age to exercise her personal rights independently. She said, and justly, I think, that her father would not stand out permanently against her will, nor her grannie either; and as for any one else, their interference was impertinent, and as such she should treat it.

The worst of it all was that this ruffled state of affairs completely upset the even tenor of her life. To be in antagonism with anybody fretted her. She ought to have been so happy, and she had very vexatious moments in her days. "You cannot help me," she would say, "and perhaps I weary you with my constant harping on one string." I assured her no always. Then she would continue: "To think that papa is angry

or indifferent takes all the sweet out of my life ! I could make any sacrifice to please him but *this*. Other girls have borne the same and worse ; but if I had to choose I would rather encounter a violent opposition than this placid contemptuous denial of my right to my own love. As if I were a pettish child crying for the moon out of the sky ! ” To whatever she said by way of complaint I listened, and preached patience, only patience, and yet more patience. But in my secret mind, I felt that she was hardly used.

And soon, of course, the neighbourhood became cognizant of the brooding dissension at Stoneleigh, and took sides, and manifested its interest in much talk. Opinions were as various as the persons who expressed them. Miss Colquhoun was the first whom I heard at large upon the matter, and from her also I heard on the same occasion that another rumour affecting Felicia was becoming public property. We met at Claylands, on a morning call.

“ Is it true that the beautiful Miss Barrington of Stoneleigh is going to marry Captain Gresham,

poor little Mrs. Fred Willis's brother?" she asked with a certain supercilious air, implying that she considered it highly improbable. As the question was addressed to nobody in particular, I did not feel called upon to answer it; and Mrs. Claylands who knew how things stood, shrewd, helpful, motherly woman that she was, put it aside as premature. It might be true or it might not, she said; but such affairs were not for gossip, and they were both (Captain Gresham and Miss Barrington) very handsome, charming, delightful young people.

"It cannot be true, *I* say," rejoined Miss Colquhoun obstinately regardless of discouragement; "for *who* and *what* is Captain Gresham, that he should aspire to the best match in the county?"

Mrs. Claylands looked amazed. "Don't you know? I imagined everybody knew. But such is fame!" cried she glowing.

"I don't mean *that*," said Miss Colquhoun knitting her brows. "Of course, I know about him in the Crimea, and what he did there—but

his family? I have heard on the best authority that his grandfather was *nobody*."

"It cannot be helped—a great many people's grandfathers were nobody. Gresham is a good name in the City of London; Gresham Brothers are India merchants.—Captain Gresham is proud of his family, I believe; and if he please Felicia Barrington, I doubt much whether a better gentleman could be found for her in any rank. His father bought Fairfield, and died suddenly, leaving a quite young family, and his widow married again. The uncles in London are both bachelors and are reputed wealthy. Captain Gresham has not much fortune in possession, but I should imagine that he has very considerable expectations."

"He does not boast of them then. I was told that he had relations engaged in business, but I hardly credited it. Perhaps *you* think Felicia Barrington lucky in her conquest? *I* certainly do *not*."

"She is said to think *herself* so, and to have made up her mind not to relinquish it; so *our* views are immaterial."

"I had heard another, and a very different story—one that I would much rather believe to be correct."

"Indeed! And what may that be?" Mrs. Claylands asked.

Miss Colquhoun lowered her voice to a chuckle, and looked inexpressibly sly and complacent as she gave us the benefit of her information. She fancied she was telling us news, but the air with which Mrs. Claylands listened showed that she, as well as myself, had heard it before.

"A little bird that builds in a Castle whispered me lately a tale of a *Marquis* and a certain fair lady."

It is always foolish to lose one's temper, but Miss Colquhoun's face, as she hinted the tale of the little bird, vexed me so suddenly that I exclaimed, "And you would like that tale to be correct? For thorough-paced, wicked worldliness commend me to you ultra pious people! It is a shame to mention Felicia Barrington's name in the same breath as the Marquis of Leigh's."

Miss Colquhoun blazed up too. "Permit me

to remind you, Mrs. Gower, that the Bible forbids to speak evil of dignities."

"Do you call such men as the Marquis *dignities*?"

"*Most* assuredly I *do*. The Duke and the Marquis are very *high* dignities. And further let me recall to you what St. Paul says, 'The woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife.'"

"A perversion of Scripture, dear Miss Colquhoun," interposed Mrs. Claylands, coming to my rescue. "If Miss Barrington were actually the wife of a bad man, my advice, and Mrs. Gower's too, would be to make the best of him; but being still free, all who love her must hope and trust that she will not draw such a miserable, scandalous partner for life as the poor Marquis."

"He is a nobleman, Mrs. Claylands."

"Who has cast off the tradition that *noblesse oblige*."

It was a source of profound annoyance to me

that this odious suggestion, connecting Felicia's name with that of the Marquis of Leigh, should have oozed out. It was circulating widely too. Helen mentioned it to me a few days after my rencounter with Miss Colquhoun; she had heard it from Mrs. Willis, at Bylands, who was naturally disquieted by it on her brother's account.

"She need not be so," said I. "Captain Gresham has more hold over Felicia than Mrs. Willis imagines, if she be jealous for him." Helen did not demur to my opinion, but she remarked that it was a thousand pities such a notion should have gone abroad. "Everybody who knows Felicia must be quite sure that it is a mere fable," urged I, scorning it with all my might.

"You credit everybody with your own enthusiastic faith in her perfections, dear Clare. Many persons know Felicia who are by no means so sure as you would have them," rejoined my sister.

We talked the matter over for some time, I wondering with whom the scheme had originated, and who had first given it publicity. Helen

thought it had originated with Lady Augusta Leigh, and as I knew she had spoken of it to Felicia's grandmamma, it was not improbable that she had discussed it with other interested persons. She was notoriously anxious that her brother should marry, and perhaps she was making it her duty to discover a lady sufficiently lovely to lure him into captivity, and sufficiently rich for that substantial charm to outweigh any nominal disparity in rank. It was a mark of her *taste* that she should have fixed on Felicia Barrington for the purpose, but it did not lead me to form a very exalted opinion of her judgment—supposing her to have any real knowledge of Felicia's character. But some of these very great ladies are afflicted with an infirmity similar to the national conceit of the Chinese, who consider all nations except themselves outer barbarians. It was intolerable that Lady Augusta should plot to entrap an innocent girl as wife for her brother, who, if he had not been in the peerage, would long ago have been in the penal colonies. His name of a Marquis, to be changed in the fulness of time for that

of a Duke, was balance more than enough in her eyes for all the beauties, graces, and virtues of youth in a commoner. Oh! how angry I felt when I reflected on her presumption—and how foolish some of my *best* acquaintances would have thought my anger had they seen it.

Felicia knew nothing yet of the conspiracy against her peace. There is no more curious phenomenon in our social life than the way in which a man or woman can go about for weeks, months, years even, in blissful ignorance of the stories told of them, the sentiments ascribed to them, and the plans laid at their expense. And a very happy contrivance of Nature we ought to count it! I would never pray for the gift to see myself as others see me—a discerning Providence has wisely withheld it from us as more than our weakness could bear. We may be sure, from the witness of our own thoughts, that it would not increase our complacent satisfaction in ourselves, and it would as certainly not promote our love for our neighbours. Felicia had hosts of friends, and some true ones; and yet amongst the most

trusted were a few who believed and *hoped* her capable of treachery and a meanness, which, in the abstract, they would have called shameful—which *was* shameful, and, by her, absolutely inconceivable until it was suggested. And chief and foremost of those who would have misled her were her father and her grandmamma Bethell. If ever a woman had reason to pray to be saved from her *friends*, Felicia Barrington had!

CHAPTER XIII.

FROM A CASTLE.

I COME now to an episode in Felicia's story of first importance. The several points and scenes of it are still very clear in my remembrance.

My little Jack was big and discreet enough now to go on an errand to the Manor, and to bring back a message. He was free of the gardens, and Felicia was often pleased to have his lively, artless prattle for company in her walks about the village. One certain October afternoon he had been with her to visit young Widow Burt, and when he came home to the nursery-tea, he was quite full of it.

"Mamma, you never sing to the poor sick people; Cousin Felicy sings to them. Why don't you sing?" was his beginning. I said I could

not sing so sweetly as she did, nor at all without music. He raised his dear bright eyes to mine.

"It is out of her heart that Cousin Felicity sings, mamma; she said to me that it was out of her heart, and because she loves Baby Burt's mother, and God who is going to take her away. Why is God going to take her away? She does not want to leave baby—she will be very sorry."

• "Not when she reaches Heaven where God is."

"No, I suppose not, because then she will hear the angels sing. Will Cousin Felicity be an angel when she goes to Heaven, mamma?"

Nurse interposed: "She's an angel on earth, Master Jack, and we can't spare her to Heaven yet. And now you eat your bread-and-milk, and don't slop your pinnie." Nurse was a thorough good servant of the old-fashioned sort, who kept Jack in order, and abridged his "metaphysics," as she called his difficult questions, by recommending the practice of present duties. I was going away downstairs with a smile on my face when my little lad's voice recalled me.

"Mamma, mamma, stop! I forgot—Cousin

Felicy wants you. I was to tell you that she is going away to the Castle to-morrow, and she wants to see you first. She had not time to come to you, so would you go to her?"

"Jack should remember always to tell mamma his message at once," said I, admonishing him with a view to future occasions; "or else mamma will not be able to trust Jack as her little messenger."

There was still an hour before we dined, and speculating why it was that I had heard nothing yet of this visit to the Castle, I went across to the Manor, and found Felicia in the midst of a dress-parade under the hands of Janet and Carr, with Helen presiding. She explained her movements.

"Papa is in London to-day, and to-morrow he is to be at Lowndes Castle. Lady Augusta sent a man on horseback over this afternoon while I was in the village to invite me to go too. I am very glad; for papa was to stay there three days before coming home; and now I shall see him so much the earlier. Dear papa! Was it not kind of Lady Augusta to think of me?"

My acquiescence was not so hearty as, under other circumstances, it might have been, but Felicia was too much absorbed in her preparations to notice that. She had a genuine pleasure in being beautiful to please her papa, and these preparations for a three days' visit were on an extensive scale. At the moment of my arrival she was in full dress, as I had never seen her before. It was a promise that she would put on her court train some day for me to admire; but, as yet, it was a promise deferred. She was splendid and lovely enough to adorn any palace in the kingdom as I saw her now: all in white cloudy softness upon shimmering satin, and her hair folded in a large loose knot without any ornament. This was her latest adopted fashion—classical, she called it; and a more charming face, or a neck more graceful, nature nor art ever moulded. "A sweet woman," that was the word for her, a gracious fair woman; for there was no awe in her beauty; kisses, caresses, kindness seemed all her due.

There were several toilettes to be passed under

review, but after one more Felicia suggested that there would be time in the morning, and so she dismissed her maid. Helen also went out in a few minutes, and then we were left to ourselves. She did not lose a moment of our precious *tête-à-tête*.

"Cousin Clare, will you do me a favour? Look over my letters to-morrow morning and the next day, and send a groom to the Castle with any you think I might be anxious for."

Oh! the cunning of her! of course it was Prince Charming's letters she wanted, without waiting a post later. And a groom must ride eight miles with them. I promised to send all.

"Papa will be sure to ask why the man comes, and I shall tell him. I mean to let papa know out of my own mouth and at once, that my mind is fixed. If he imagines that I can be persuaded to give way, there will be no peace for either of us. But I am in hopes that when he sees my resolution, he will be kind and consent. For he loves me, and all my happiness depends upon retaining his love, and not losing that other which they would make so light of."

"Be open and persevere," was my counsel still.
 "You will have need of all your courage."

"Yes. Sometimes I pause in my happy thoughts, and remember that I am really in a great straight. It is a sad and dreadful thing to defy papa—but then I ask myself why he should require me to give up what I hold as my chief earthly blessing—the love of a true good man. Some women are fickle of feeling enough, but it would go hard with me, I know it would, if my heart were violently wrenched from what it loves."

"I believe that, Felicia; you would suffer even more than you fear. If for any of the poor reasons alleged against Captain Gresham, you are prevailed on to break your pledge, you will come to despise yourself. And mortified pride adds a poignant sting to the wounds of affection."

"Cousin Clare, I am strong; I shall never be moved!" she said, and the rosy colour mounted into her face. "If they persecute me and are angry, or if they think scorn of him, I will ask them which of my kinsmen by blood is his equal

—is so honourable, brave and beautiful as my Prince Charming? Think of poor Uncle Tom *daring* to sneer at Captain Gresham, and to hint that he is not so high-minded as he seems—to hint that it is my *fortune* has won him! As if I were not woman enough to be loved for myself! I told him that his insinuations were an insult to me, and forbade him to come into my presence again until he had made amends. And then he must needs say that he spoke only to prepare me; and what I refused to hear in my ear all the world would soon be proclaiming on the house-top. Let all the world proclaim, and what care I!”

“The less you care the better. It is your duty to let the world know that you are not of its way of thinking. It is your duty to stand fast by your plighted word, for his sake as much as for your own. It would be a cruel wrong to throw him over after what has passed. Some may try to convince you that your word is not binding, if your papa refuse to ratify it—but I tell you it is peculiarly binding.”

"I know it, Cousin Clare." She paused a moment, and there was a humid shyness in her eyes as she went on, in a low voice. "I think I fell in love with him first: he was for ever in my thoughts before he had looked or said a word of love to me—and so I drew him. Do you think he would have gone away heart-whole if I had let him?"

"No. I don't think he would have gone away heart-whole, but there would have been no poison to rankle in his wound. I believe he would have left you as one above his ambition, whom he could have dearly loved had fortune been more propitious. There is no shame to you that you loved him first—it was a light attraction; a mere scorching, not skin-deep, which would have worn off by now, if he had not let your witchcraft prevail over his conventional scruple. I am glad that he did. But so much the more do you owe him fidelity, loyalty, and a steadfast face against those who would degrade him in your esteem."

"That they will never do, *never*! He loves me *now*, Cousin Clare?"

“Ardently as woman can desire!—and that is another peril. If you could let him be cut off from you, you would do him a mischief past healing. He would lose all faith in us. But you are going to be true to him ; to live and die for him ; to be, please heaven, his happy, happy wife !”

She had drooped her face so that I could not see it. What I did see was a great tear splashing on her clasped hands. Why should she weep ? I cannot tell. Tears were near her eyes, and fuller in her heart, perhaps, than I knew. Musing over our conversation afterwards I could not but feel that in her very expressions of self-confidence there was a vein of self-distrust—a half-conscious fear of her own weakness. The impression left on my mind was one of pain, doubt and anxiety for her.

Besides her papa Felicia did not know who she should meet at the Castle, but there was always a rapid succession of visitors in the shooting-season ; and it was reckoned a prodigious honour in the county to be on the list of its annual guests. The

Duke was, in fact, our "great man." And he had excellent qualities besides his "greatness." He promoted public works and improvements for the public good, and was a liberal and active administrator of his large territory. His Duchess was some years dead, and his eldest daughter, the Lady Augusta, the only one left unmarried, did the honours of his house. The Marquis came very little into the country, but he was at the Castle during Felicia's visit, and the rarity of his appearances made the event the more noted. It was told to me the morning she left the Manor.

She rode over to Lowndes, and I saw her set off: her natural gaiety all in full bloom, and thoroughly purposed to enjoy herself. Transient clouds and showers notwithstanding, there was a well-spring of hope and joy in her heart. "Good-bye! be happy, come back safe!" was all I had time to cry to her from the open drawing-room window as she pulled up in the road and looked over the hedge. She nodded and smiled, and then turned and trotted down the hill, I listening till

the sound of the horse's hoofs died away in the distance.

It was a most exquisite morning, and she must have had a delicious ride. Lords and squires and farmers had not then in Gladeshire got the length of enclosing the grassy margins of the roads, nor of paring the hedges to the quick. We had still pretty bits of wayside scenery; knolls and slopes, and expanses of turf where stood groups of fine trees, and white-thorn bushes, and patches of hazel; where the windfalls of sticks were nobody's property, and the poor had them, and where the windfalls of beech-mast and acorns were the undisputed perquisite of village pigs. We have begun to change all that now, and the change is not for the better.

"It is robbing the poor, and I will never allow it while I live," was a speech of dear Felicia's to her steward when he represented to her the gain it would bring to the estate in a few years if the irregular open spaces that used to lie along the left-hand side of the road under the Beecham copses were fenced in and planted. Nearly all

our cottagers kept a cow then, and to these sweet green patches the children used to lead them, and play, or gather sticks, quest for nuts, or string daisies while they grazed. What would become of the cows if these common pastures were enclosed, Felicia wanted to know. The steward said that, of course, they would cease to be kept by some persons; and he instanced old Mrs. Burt as one who would have to give up her cow. Then it was that Felicia called these acquisitions in favour of herself "robbing the poor," and I am sure she was just in what she said—morally and politically just. "You would put," said she, "a little more money into my purse of which I should never feel the weight, because it is heavier than my needs already, and you would take away the rights of my poor cottagers, making them poor indeed. You laugh at their *rights*—if they were as strong as we are they would maintain them: they recognize them well enough, but they do not know how to go about protecting them, and rich men who think they can never have enough, rob them without fear of law or equity. If Widow

Burt could not feed her little cow as she does, she would sink into meagre poverty—now she feels well-to-do, as I would like all my poor tenants to do. It is a cruel farce to steal from them every means they have of helping themselves, and then to preach to them the sweetness of labour and independence, and the duty of submission to God and the Squire. I shall not remove the old landmarks of Stoneleigh to seize the inheritance of the poor—never propose it to me again!”

I remember these sentiments of Felicia's while I write, because just now the people have been again deprived of a privilege which she restored to them at this period, when their rights in the soil were brought before her. There is a vast meadow, the Ings we call it, in a bend of the river which from time immemorial was common to the villagers on the payment of a shilling a head to the Lord of the Manor for the cattle they turned out upon it. When Mr. Barrington's extravagance began to pinch him (while Felicia was yet a child) he had taken away this privilege, and let the meadow to a grazier at a higher profit.

Felicia, being put upon the clue by her steward's proposal to fence-in the purlieus of the Beecham copses, made inquiry, and gave the water-meadows back to the small tenants on the old terms. Mr. Tom Bethell, since his accession to the property, has again resumed the privilege, and has seized moreover every shred and margin of waste land where cow or donkey or geese could get a bite.

Arthur says that the thrifty cottagers' market-baskets, which used to go to Gladestone twice a week full of butter, eggs, and poultry, will fall off. It must be so. When the labourer's wife has nothing but her husband's wages, it is very hard to live; but with her garden-stuff, a little crop of fruit to sell in the autumn, the chickens which picked up a living almost for nothing, and the little cow which fed on the common, she was able to clothe and nourish her children well. I fear we shall see poverty such as there is in places where "improvement" has been long at work. I am not a political economist, but I have the use of my reason. The *power* that large owners of land possess over the bodies and souls of men is

immense. Some of them feel and act as if it were *absolute*: now as to land, "the land is the Lord's," and an onerous *trust* in whatever hands it be—not *property* like the gains of trade. Men and women must dwell upon it, whether the nominal owner will or no; and if he strain his *power*, calling it his *right*, he is guilty of malversation in his *trust*. What things are done in our day! I have heard of a hungry poor man prosecuted and sent to prison and hard labour for plucking a turnip in a field, and eating it! Enough, I say, to bring a curse upon the land! Surely masters and magistrates, who measure such *justice* to the poor, have forgotten their Bible and its ancient laws, which say that a passer through a vineyard shall eat his fill of grapes, and through a corn-field shall pluck the ears with his hand, and forbid that any man shall make a clean riddance in the day of the harvest—on peril of forfeiting the blessing of the Lord of the harvest. We talk a vast deal about philanthropy, but we are fallen far behind the old customs in brotherly kindness!

It is reflecting on these things, and the changes that are being made in and round the village that carries me back to Felicia, and her principles of action while she was sovereign at Stoneleigh. The spirited graceful figure riding about the fields, the roads, the woods, dear and familiar to all the country, passes before me again.—She knew everybody, from the last-born baby in the village to the oldest bed-ridden and infirm folk ; she had a right royal memory for names, ages, and circumstances once confided to her, and the tenderest heart and most generous hand to pity and heal the troubles not beyond human healing. I can truly say of my darling, paraphrasing the words of Holy Job, that “when the ear heard her, then it blessed her ; and when the eye saw her, it gave witness to her : because she delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him ; the blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon her ; she was as one that comforteth the mourners.”

But let me remember that it is a history, not a panegyric, that I have undertaken to write.

My first despatch to Felicia at the Castle did not contain a letter from Prince Charming ; the second did. On the third morning, when we were expecting her back at the Manor that day, I received a letter by post to tell me that her visit was to be prolonged over Sunday, and to bid me continue to send the groom as before with her letters. Thus she wrote for gossip, after she had issued her commands.—

“This is a delightful house to stay in ; there is so much to see, and so much going on. Old Crotchets is here, and you know what excellent friends we are, and Mr. Falkner and his sister. Lady Augusta says Mr. Falkner is a great favourite at the Castle, and the Duke seeks his advice in whatever he does at Lowndes. I never see him but at breakfast and dinner, and we have not exchanged six words ; but his sister delights me. She is so quaint and odd, not vulgar at all, but frankly ignorant of the ways of our society. Do you recollect her asking poor Uncle Tom which would fetch the better price, he or her brother,

if both were to sell? She continually comes out with speeches as discountenancing as that was to him, and I cannot discover whether it is with the shrewdness of malice prepense, or only a trick of plain speaking such as fine society has given up. The effect is irresistible sometimes, and I can well imagine that some people may be what Lady Augusta says *she* is—afraid of her. She does not set up for a wit or for clever at all, but she has travelled so much with her brother, and lived amongst men of his sort until she has acquired their tone of mind, and a fund of most amusing talk. I shall invite her to the Manor; for papa has quite taken to her.

“Mr. Cartwright leaves to-day, and the Falkners to-morrow, and then come the two married daughters, with their spouses. I don’t know either of them, but Lady Augusta promises that I shall like them both. *She* is goodness itself to me; I think her a most amiable woman, though she has overweening notions of her nobility. I could fancy, now and then, that Miss Falkner was making fun of her airs of condescension. I like to watch them

together; they look as if they would enjoy a good quarrel, a bout of high words. Shall you call me a naughty tattler if I tell you what old Crotchets whispered to me as the cause of it? 'She would marry him to-morrow, if he'd ask her—but he won't!' *She* meaning Lady Augusta, *he* Mr. Falkner. And this is why little Miss Falkner sticks up her pretty back when the fine lady tries to stroke her down—she despises such pretensions to her brother. In the midst of the comedy the Duke and Mr. Falkner move about beautifully unconscious—but imagine the state of the world if such a *mésalliance* were possible!

"This is written between the lights, after a ride about the park with papa by himself. You may guess what my thoughts were when we started; but papa put off any discussion of you know what—saying, that it would keep until we got home. I was not sorry to defer it—one likes to defer a bad moment; but I shall never have a mind quite at ease until it is settled.—See how my pen runs! I took a little sheet on purpose to write little, and I have barely left space enough to say

that I am ever your loving Felicia. (Written across.)

“That was a sweet letter you sent me yesterday.”

As Felicia was not to be expected that afternoon Helen went out for a drive with me in the pony carriage, and we took the road to Horsley Moor. It was a brilliant day, and the early autumnal landscape as lovely as at any season of the year. The moor was in the Duke's territory, and across one corner of it was to cut the new railway. Already the sods were turned, and a gang of navvies at work; and riding along the line was Mr. Falkner, mounted on a serviceable stout cob, no beauty, but good for use. He was in working trim, dusty, heated, busy, and with him was another equally energetic man, setting on the labourers, whom I knew later as the contractor for the line. Mr. Falkner was the engineer-in-chief, and we heard that certain difficulties in its construction which had hitherto delayed it, had been admirably got over by his skill and genius.

He was, indeed, a man of very great ability, and most highly considered amongst practical, progressive people; but in his suit of brown tweed powdered with chalk, his drab wideawake, and snuff-coloured leather leggings, he did not look quite the man one would suspect of aspiring to match with a duke's daughter. He looked a man of too much sense.

We had left Mr. Falkner ten minutes behind and were zigzagging up a steep rise of the moorland road, when suddenly, over the top of it, and a little to the left on the turf, appeared a gay cavalcade. Lady Augusta and Mr. Barrington, Miss Falkner, Felicia and the Marquis. Hats flew off, and we crossed at a quick pace, but the next minute Felicia wheeled her horse round, and rode after us. We pulled up, and she was very glad to see us, though we had parted so lately. It did not appear, however, that she had very much to say, and there, within earshot, was the Marquis. It pleased me to have the opportunity of seeing him again, for I had not seen him since he was a fat, uncouth, shy boy.

He was now a pulpy red-visaged man, reserved, solemn, pompous as a figure on a monument. Miss Colquhoun, who had a proper reverence for rank, professed to see in him a truly ducal grandeur; but I could discern only a fatuous self-conceit, bolstered up with traditional notions of honour, when all real honour was gone. His utterance was thick, and further confused by a lisping drawl; and as his character was bad, on Miss Falkner's queer principle of selling a man for what he was worth, the Marquis of Leigh, put up to auction, would probably have turned out worth less than nothing. And this was the wretched being Lady Augusta and others *dared* to think might condescend for a wife to sweet Felicia Barrington.

While we were still halting, Mr. Falkner trotted up and joined the party; and in pairing off again to continue their road, Lady Augusta paired with him, Mr. Barrington with Miss Falkner, and Felicia was again left to the Marquis. Helen and I naturally fell a-talking of them when they were gone. The Marquis was,

my sister admitted, one of the ugliest of men, but she was quite sure that the majority of people were unable to see it—honestly incapable of seeing it; because of the glamour the mere name of a Marquis sheds before average eyes. She then mentioned Lady Augusta, and I confided to her Felicia's bit of naughty tattle; to which she calmly replied: "I have no doubt that Old Crotchets is right; I should not be surprised to hear of Lady Augusta accepting anybody who could give her a good establishment. When the Duke dies the Castle will be no home for her. But I should be surprised if a shrewd man like Mr. Falkner invited her to share his—Stanilands is grand enough for her, but——"

"You think it would be too much presumption in him to ask her. I don't suppose he will,—but, remember, a daughter of the Earl of Northmere has married an artist, and a very bad artist."

"True—I wonder how the R.A.'s dare defy public opinion to the extent of hanging his pictures—vulgar enough for village signboards they are, though all royal and noble portraits. Perhaps it

is a charity to employ him—people are practically very kind in this world.”

Speaking of Stanilands made me propose to include it in our afternoon drive, and I turned Judy's head in that direction. It was rather beyond Judy's range, but she could do it on a time by chance, and I had not seen the place since Mr. Falkner's new house was finished. Stanilands was old church lands, and bore the ruins of a beautiful priory, once the richest religious house in that division of Gladeshire. It was but a ruin, however, and dangerously neglected, and the parish-church was not much better when Mr. Falkner obtained possession of them. The farms and dependencies which had formerly constituted the estate of Stanilands, had passed piecemeal from the old proprietors into various hands, until only the mansion-house, which blocked the view of the Priory from the high-road, the garden, and one large field, lying in a bend of the river, remained. The precious fragment had been sold to Mr. Falkner two or three years before we knew him in Gladeshire, and, though the last Squire Stanilands

died in the house, it was understood that he only ended his days there by the leave and forbearance of the new owner. But within a week of his retirement to the family-vault under the chancel of the church, his old house was level with the ground, and from that day to the present, I had never seen the place at all. But all the countryside had heard of the handsome residence that had risen on a new site there, revealing the Priory to public view, and making the utmost of the natural charms of the situation. During the summer Mr. Falkner had taken up his abode there with his sister, and the society of the neighbourhood had graciously made them welcome. We had not called, because, as I said before, Stanilands was rather too far off, and the first and only time I had seen them until to-day was on the occasion of the Peace Celebration at Stoneleigh; but everywhere they were well spoken of, and as an acquisition.

I had prepared myself to see a fine house, but nothing so architecturally exquisite as the fabric that Mr. Falkner had reared on that forsaken,

neglected spot. The house was not large, but it was perfect in its proportions, and built with a taste and a cost of labour that now-a-days we rarely see. The stone of the country and old stones that had cumbered the ground about the ruins for generations, had been employed for the walls, and the roof was of old tiles, mossed and weather-stained, giving it already that ripe colouring of age which no other beauty can compensate for the want of. Some persons had talked of sacrilege, and of using the ancient Priory for a quarry, when they heard of the builders laying stones new and old together; but Mr. Falkner did as he liked, and let them say. When he had cleared the ruins of the heaps of fallen materials, to the joy of ecclesiologists, he proceeded to excavate and lay bare the old foundations, and did all that art and science could to preserve the remnant that was left standing. And beyond and about it, to the verge of the cliffs by the river, he laid out his gardens and pleasure-grounds, and out of a desolate wilderness created an earthly paradise. The church was now undergoing restoration at his sole cost,

and a new school was already built and occupied. A few very conservative folk thought it all a great pity, and made often allusions to the "old family," as if they had been a pattern for squires, instead of a thriftless, selfish, corrupt race, around whom had been produced a village full of ignorant, idle people who contributed more rogues and vagabonds to the Quarter - Sessions than any other three villages within the county. Mr. Falkner had been put in the commission of the peace, and was reforming his district with a high hand. Thanks to his benevolence, justice and severity, the young generation would have a good chance of growing up materially to improve the old stock.

We viewed the new beauties of Stanilands only so far as they were visible from the road, but what we saw was enough to give us a notion of what was unseen, and Helen remarked, laughing, as we turned to drive homewards: "Mr. Falkner is quite the best match in this division of the county — always excepting the Marquis."

"I should not even except the Marquis. And who else is there? only the eldest sons at Claylands and Bylands."

"And Mr. Barrington," added Helen quietly.

"Oh! surely he will never marry again. Remember Felicia——"

"It is improbable. But one can never be positive what a man will do."

"Nor a woman either—eh? They used to predict me that I should soon lose you by a second marriage; but I have you safe yet, you see."

There was no answer to this. I was struck, and peeping under Helen's bonnet, I perceived that she was smiling to herself in a roguish way that meant mischief. "Helen, you don't mean to say that you have been keeping anything from me?" cried I, almost pulling Judy on her haunches in my sudden alarm.

"Don't upset us, Clary dear," said she with provoking coolness. "If we get safe home, perhaps I will tell you something—though I daresay you have half guessed it already."

"No, I have not the shadow of a guess. I am utterly amazed—taken utterly by surprise."

"But you are not angry, Clary?"

"Tell me who it is. You have been *very* reserved."

"I will not tell you until you look kinder."

"Is it Mr. Falkner?"

"Mr. Falkner? No! I prophesy that Mr. Falkner will marry that buxom, blooming cousin of his, who has been over to Stanilands twice to stay—a Scotch lassie with a lovely lowland accent, a complexion of milk and roses, and hair—well, curly golden hair with the red sun in it."

"Don't talk nonsense, Ellie, but tell me—who is it?"

"Old Crotchets."

"*I don't believe it.*"

But it *was* Old Crotchets, nevertheless—and this was what had come of Felicia and he being such excellent friends! How Felicia must have been taken in! It made me smile to think of it. When the gentleman was trotting his nag by her little carriage-ponies (a circumstance I had often

heard of without giving it a further thought), and paying a sentimental court to her, he was really wooing my Helen. It must have been going on ever since she came to the Manor. I recollected now many suspicious appearances. Well, they say, lucky's the wooing that's long a-doing, and this had been years a-doing—or is it the other way?—lucky's the wooing that's *not* long a-doing—Yet, Old Crotchets! What might his age be? Fifty? No, not so much as that—forty-seven, perhaps. He had been called Old Crotchets for twenty years; from the period when he succeeded to his patrimony, and impoverished himself for life, by paying off, with interest, the debts of his father and grandfather. This was said to be the reason why he had never married before; he was too poor to keep any establishment. He had a character for quixotically lofty principle, and a reputation for the most incisive bitter speech, combined with a habit of speaking aloud. He was feared in some quarters, but this fear amongst the mean, was balanced by a genuine respect amongst the higher-minded. The solitary, student

life he led had developed a few eccentricities of manner, but he had a good keen face, a wiry, tall, alert figure, and a generous heart and moderate temper—altogether, when I had recovered from the shock that it *was* Old Crotchets, I easily disposed myself to believe that Helen, if she must marry again, could not well marry more discreetly. Perhaps the fact that she would still remain within my reach, helped to promote my resignation. But I said that her going would be a great pity for Felicia.

“Not if it obliges her father to stay more at Stoneleigh. It would be better for both of them if they were more together,” Helen replied. “Felicia will hardly consent to another *chaperone*—to a successor in my room; and until she marries, there will be no choice left to Mr. Barrington but to take care of her himself.”

“I wish with all my heart that Captain Gresham may be able to make himself acceptable to her friends—then she might marry with brief delay,” said I.

Helen shook her head; she saw difficulties in

the path that I could not see—or rather, which I would not recognize as any real difficulties at all. Talking of these, and of Helen's own affair, brought us home to the Rectory, and the first thing we saw on entering my drawing-room was a letter on the table, laid to catch my eye. The groom who had gone over to the Castle in the morning with Felicia's letters had brought this back. I instantly knew her writing:—What could she have had to write about—and so soon again? She had not mentioned it when we met on Horsley Moor—to be sure, with the Marquis close by she had not an opportunity, if it were a private matter. But she looked blithe enough, I said; there could be nothing wrong. Helen urged me to open the letter and see; she had not thought Felicia looking so blithe. It was an unconfessed dread that made me dally: but, at last, I broke the seal, unfolded the sheet within, and sat down to read it—Helen reading it at the same time over my shoulder. This was what my darling wrote:—

“DEAREST COUSIN CLARE,—

“I AM very unhappy, and very, *very* angry. Somebody has been writing to papa about you and me and Prince Charming—I don’t exactly know what, for the letter was not shown me (it arrived by this morning’s post), but papa says he warns me that *our* intimacy must cease, unless I promise to give up my ‘insane delusion’ because you encourage it! And he says further that dear Mrs. Gresham shall leave me, and he will give me another duenna. He announced these resolutions in that gusty annoyed way, which is his way of showing perplexity, and which would soon pass if he were left to the motions of his own kind temper; but you are my dear good friends, you and your sister, and shall not be insulted if I can hinder it, and I have told him that I shall let you know beforehand what he threatens. He insisted on my not confessing what he calls my ‘insane delusion’ to Lady Augusta, or Miss Falkner, or anybody here—as if I should be likely to blazon my sorrows to the world! but I said that not for anything would I *deny* my engagement to Captain

Gresham, if I were challenged to say whether it were true. Oh! how impatient he was then! I see well that there is to be a great quarrel, and the thought of it breaks my heart, but I will *not* give in! Who can have written to papa to stir up his anger? He declined to tell me, and I shall not ask again. It was a wicked and a cruel thing to do. I shall not write what was said of Captain Gresham—it was too false and insolent to be repeated. It makes me wretched to be at variance with dear papa! I wish now we were at home; for it is such a trouble to have to go about smiling and talking of nothing, when I should like to shut myself up, and have a good cry.—Continue to send me my letters. I sorely need the comfort of them! What would my own dear mamma have said if she could have lived to see her poor Felicity so persecuted?”

Helen laughed a little over the pathetic exaggeration of this letter, as it sounded to her then, with the recollection of Felicia's blooming, flowery face

before her eyes as we had seen it since the letter was written.

We both said : " It will come right, it will come right, at last." But for all that we sighed, and wished it were right without any long waiting for. As for the menaces directed against ourselves, they were naught.

END OF VOL. I.

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